THIS IS HUNGRY WORK

A HOZIER INSPIRED ANTHOLOGY

JACKBOOTJUMP

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ANDREW JOHN HOZIER-BYRNE IS AN IRISH MUSICIAN KNOWN best by his stage name "Hozier." His style is best described as having origins in folk, soul, and blues and oftentimes features lyrics that are borrowed ideas from social justice movements, religious themes and literary devices and ideas. His poetic lyrics are underscored with a variety of instruments expertly crafted and composed to create hauntingly beautiful melodies and tunes. In 2013, his debut single "Take Me To Church" reached number 2 on the US *Billboard* Hot 100 Charts and reached multi-platinum status in multiple countries (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Canada, just to name a few). He has released three albums so far, his self-titled debut album *Hozier* (2013), *Wasteland, Baby!* (2019), and *Unreal Unearth* (2023). Throughout his career he has also released a number of singles and collaborated with many artists (Noah Kahan, Bear McCreary, and more).

This project is not affiliated with Hozier, but was created with his political, social, and activist perspectives in mind. The works within this Zine are each inspired by a Hozier song and written (or painted, drawn, sketched) with this inspiration in mind.

The works that you will find within the pages of this project are absolutely wonderful and—in a very Hozier style—inspired at times by religious themes, famous paintings, Greek and Roman mythology, famous novels and poetry. This anthology is a passion project for me personally and a lovely collection of works that all involved are very proud of.

Thank you for taking the time to engage, and I hope that you enjoy it.

Introducing, *This Is Hungry Work: A Hozier Inspired Anthology*.

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ARSONIST'S LULLABY

DASHICRA1

Arsonist's Lullaby

I.

When I was a child, I heard voices
Some would sing and some would scream
You soon find you have few choices
I learned the voices died with me
When I was a child, I'd sit for hours
Staring into open flame
Something in it had a power
Could barely tear my eyes away

THIS IS A CONFESSION.

I don't know whether there is a god—or even gods—who might absolve me now. It doesn't bother me much. If there was such a thing as innocence, it might have been true of my younger self.

Still, the love in me was the same shape as the hate in you.

We didn't see it then.

Do you still think about my mother? I have so many memories of quite a few versions of her. I'm not sure to this day which was the one you knew best. After I was grown up, we'd always talk about her like she was someone we'd both mostly forgotten and were trying to recall how she looked, how she sounded, what her thoughts on our lives might have been. It seems ridiculous now. We were both wrong anyway. I'm glad I got to find out why on my own. It answered so many questions.

She used to talk to me from the chimney. The one on the other side of my wall. Of course you know the one. With my bed pressed up against that wall, the heat from the smoke passing by warmed me up pretty well in the winter.

At least, I remember it did.

Her voice was so soft when I heard it from there. She was insistent, though. Things like, "Go to sleep like Daddy told you," or "Make sure to stay under the covers so the mice don't bite." We never had any mice, did we? I think she said that so I wouldn't get cold. Hilarious, right? I'd talk to her too, sometimes. I don't think she heard me.

You got so upset when I tried to find where her voice was coming from that time. I know, it was an awful mess. Crawling around in the charcoal like that was so much fun, though. They have those modern gas fireplaces with the fake wood on the front now. You can touch the glass and grab onto the plastic wood they've got all rigged up to glow, and it won't even burn you. I would've loved that when I was little.

Anyway, about my mom. I always wondered why you kept everything about her constricted the way you did. Like she was an object you wanted to hide or something. Maybe if I'd seen her taken care of like she should've been I would've known better for myself. Not that it's all your fault, obviously. She always gave as good as she got. I was usually there with her when she would act up like that, putting up a fight. She'd burn the dinner, she'd have a little dance on the grass with some liquor and a cigarette. The neighbours yelled at us for that one. I don't know why she wasn't louder about it to me, though. She liked to play like she knew everything about everything but just didn't want to tell, like the world was her little secret.

I watched her a lot back then, just stared at her while she did her usual routine. I wanted to know her better than anybody, to be the person she told those secrets she kept. You always pulled me away from her. I understand why—I do—but it's not like it made much difference in the long run. I still turned out to be the person you were afraid of. I think I knew even back then what would happen. Just a little kid with a runny nose and dirty knees hitting rocks together and playing with sticks in the garden. I was always her kid first, after all.

I don't think you noticed it, but she kept track of me. She didn't let on what she was up to, trying to keep a low profile, but it's hard

to ignore somebody like her. It wasn't very often at the time, just little things, little moments to make sure I was doing what I was supposed to do, you know. Little signals. It was like our roles were reversed, and now she was the one who couldn't bear to look away.

Even after all these years, I still meet her often. I didn't want you to worry, so I've been keeping that to myself. Might as well come clean sooner or later, but I've got a bit more to say first before I get back to that. I think you'll understand.

II.

When I was 16, my senses fooled me
Thought gasoline was on my clothes
I knew that something would always rule me
I knew the scent was mine alone

It was tough on you, having to look out for me the way you did. Most of this has probably sounded at least a bit accusatory, but really, you were fighting a lot of battles I didn't want to think about. Whenever I look at myself in the mirror, I see her, little flickers here and there. I can't imagine what that was like for you. You worked so hard to give me the life you thought was best for me, for everybody, and I kept running back to old habits, making you clean up the mess.

Apologising for me was almost a second job sometimes, right?

Remember when you taught me to drive? That was a disaster. I saw your hands shaking every time you passed me the keys. Rationed-out fuel, no extra pocket money you didn't know about so I couldn't buy more on my own… It got even worse when you heard about cigarettes getting popular with teens again, all those strangers keeping a pack and a lighter on them and willing to share with friends. You used to tell me to empty my pockets when I got home.

Pretty sure the other kids my age thought you were out of your mind sometimes, but I don't blame you. She was still in your head all the time. She was in my head, too, to be honest. It took everything I could not to run right to her when I noticed her out and

about. I knew you'd be able to tell somehow if I did, but you have to know I really did fight it. I was only sixteen. I wanted to be able to be myself without hurting anybody, to feel safe in my own skin and have it be true, to understand all the sides of myself, including hers. But we couldn't all be together and still avoid the dangers, I knew that much. And I still believed in what you hoped I would be, even after everything.

Did you ever wonder why I didn't run away when I had the chance? We can both admit now that there were ways I could have done it, despite all the precautions you took. But you had faith in me, that's all. You left the keys in the bowl by the door, just sitting there unguarded all night. Maybe you were testing me.

It doesn't matter now. It wouldn't have mattered then either, come to think of it. Like I said, nothing you did could have stopped me from becoming myself. If I had decided to become a teenage runaway back then, maybe this wouldn't be so difficult.

Would you have let me back in if I'd gone out and done everything you were scared of? If I'd come back smelling like gasoline and cheap liquor and smoke? Would you have hugged me and pretended nothing had changed, treated it like a normal teenage rebellion?

I wonder about that a lot, if you would have forgiven me then. I know you can't forgive me now.

III.

When I was a man I thought it ended
When I knew love's perfect ache
But my peace has always depended
On all the ashes in my wake
All you have is your fire
And the place you need to reach
Don't you ever tame your demons
But always keep 'em on a leash

I said this would be a confession, and I swear it will be. I've been avoiding talking about the hard parts so maybe you could understand. You still raised me, even if I turned out to be something that doesn't belong in your house, or in your life, anymore.

I tried for so long. I did everything I could think to do. I didn't let her take over and make my decisions for me, no matter how much I wanted to.

That's the thing, though. What it all comes down to in the end. You loved all of me except the parts that came from her. You feared for me for so long you didn't notice that you were starting to fear me instead. After all your hard work, you couldn't escape what I was.

I haven't just been seeing my mother around, dad. I've been becoming her. We're the same. We always have been. You must have suspected for a while, at least, that the child you saved wasn't what you thought. That the fire didn't begin with gasoline or matches.

Do you understand?

My mother is inside me, and her mother, and her mother's mother. Her voice is in my head, her breath is in my lungs. You were so petrified after you realised what she was. What I am. What we are. What we've done. You locked her out the best you could, but you never could get rid of her completely without being rid of me too.

You told me I was your miracle when I was little. That you had "saved" me. I believed you until I couldn't anymore, and even now a part of me still wants to forget what I know about myself, about my *selves*, just to fit into that innocence you thought I could be. None of this was your fault. I need you to know that. I couldn't have asked for a better person to guide me through these years.

You deserved a miracle, the kind you truly wanted, the kind you expected. Really, you did. How could you have done anything but love the miracle you thought I was? I hope somehow a part of you still loves me, even knowing what you do now. Even after all the destruction, the accidents, the investigations, the explanations and apologies and fear you lived with for so long, I can't help but hope you love me, even if you can't forgive me.

I'm returning to the cliffs, dad. Right where you first found me. You might find me there again after you finish reading this, if you hurry.

My mother and I and all of the others before us will be waiting, ready to see the miracle so many years in the making. I'll have that innocence again, if there is such a thing. A new life, a new soul.

Whatever awaits me, I will remember you. I've never had a father before, and you were my favourite part of this journey.

TAKE ME TO CHURCH

LIS ALDAINE

Take Me to Church

Offer me my deathless death–

IF IT WERE NOT FOR THE FLAMES, IT COULD BE ALMOST PEACEFUL.

The constellations are bright, scattered across the heavens like a handful of diamonds spilled across black velvet. The wind sighs gently through the trees. Across from me, my love smiles.

It is a sad smile.

The fire crackles at our feet. It licks with hungry tongues at the edges of our clothes. How eager it is to consume! How wanton, how delighted in destruction the blaze is! But of course the flames cannot help it. It is their nature.

A sudden surge of anger fills me once again—of course the fire cannot help being ruinous; of course it cannot help but devour everything in its path. That is how it is, and that cannot be changed. There is nothing you can do by attempting to hold back the flames. Even if you put it out, it is only momentary. The embers will re-ignite.

I am not talking about the fire.

Just as quickly, my anger fades and is replaced by ever-growing grief. Is this how the fire burns to ashes? Tied at the wrists and ankles; bound at the knees; muzzled like a dog? I cannot even say her *name*. Is this how it was supposed to go?

My love meets my gaze from across the fire, and her look of love is enough to make my hands ache. I long to touch her—but even if I could, it wouldn't save us. The fire grows close now. I can feel its suffering like a phantom trace on my skin.

Soon the pain will overtake me and I will think of nothing but the flames. For now, I will look at my love across the fire and be grateful; because we are together even when they have forced us apart. Yet I will also weep—not because they are hurting me, though I am

in great agony. But I weep because she is hurting, and I made a vow to stand against that long ago.

What can I do? Nothing, but love her.

I look at my love and smile. The fire snaps like breaking bones.

A long time ago, back when the world was still young, there lived two lovers.

That word—*lovers*—is enough to clue you in. They are lovers: what else can they be? It is only lovers who do not have the privilege of telling their own tale; only lovers who live endlessly in the minds of those who come after them; only lovers who are immortal in the fabric of their own story.

If I am beginning to sound redundant, please bear with me. I do not write these words without reason.

The lovers were happy. Are happy, still. As happy as they can be, with their world's end looming just over the horizon.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The lovers did not grow up equals. The lady was haughty and proud; the girl was headstrong and stubborn. The lady grew up never wanting for anything; the girl did not grow up so much as force her way to maturity. Yet they met, and fell in love.

I am not telling you a fairytale.

If the heavens ever did speak,
She's the last true mouthpiece.

Our first meeting is as distinct in my mind as if it were yesterday. It comes back to me almost fully formed, one sense at a time.

Smell. Copper drips heavy down my upper lip, dried blood crusting on the underside of my nose as I desperately try to catch my breath. Smoke filters into my lungs as I heave in gulps of air.

Taste. The tang of rust fills my mouth as I spit out blood onto the cracked stones at my feet. My tongue prods around my upper teeth, checking for anything loose or missing.

Touch. The ground beneath me is sticky with devil-knows-what, but I press my palms into the dust regardless and push myself slowly to my feet. One arm is wrapped around my bloody waist; the other leans for support on a nearby wall. It's hard to stand.

Hear. Light footsteps, far off at first but steadily making their way closer. The delicate tap tap of boots on harsh stone. The huff of my own breath in my ears. A startled, *oh God*—

See. Rounding the corner, there's this girl. And maybe it's the blood loss, maybe it's the lingering concussion, maybe it's just my own delirium. But I swear at that moment, with the clouds parting just for a minute to let the sun through—I swear she glows, just like an angel.

They were not kind days, nor could anyone reasonably call them *gentle*. Indeed it was primarily a time of deep fear and trepidation, no one knowing what would come next.

Still, we managed to find our own little pockets of time, carved out from our doom marching ever-closer. Those moments are sun-gold in my mind, thick and syrupy like molasses poured straight from the jar. If I close my eyes I can lose myself in her again.

Purposeful looks and trailing fingers—flutter of eyes here, hand tracing over freckles there. My eyes follow the lines of her mouth; I indulge in the curve of her waist, skin warm against skin. Our mouths slot together like a key turning home in a lock. I smile against her lips.

The next part comes in stops and starts.

Whisper blessing against crescent of neck. Move slowly to kneel. Look to heaven through lowered lashes. Lips parted. Longing. Worship. Press of head to thigh. Benediction. Arch of back. Chest to ceiling like bared offering. Long warmth sparks fire. Knees ache. Sound echoes in empty space. A shout. A song. A prayer. Oh, God.

There is no end, no beginning, only the intertwined link of bodies that is *us*, the us interwoven together like sinuous tapestry of skin against skin, the us curled around each other like flesh around bone around marrow, the us beating heart to tender heart.

My church offers no absolutes,
She tells me, "Worship in the bedroom."

I am the more methodical harvester, it is true.

That is not to say my wife is inefficient, but more so that I place more value on the—what is the word?—*stray* produce discarded from the vine. I have a stronger appreciation for the gleaning, an appreciation of course made obvious when one recalls my upbringing. When one is brought up vicious and starving on the filth-ridden cobblestones of the city's lowest alleys, one learns a greater respect for the food that the careless choose to discard.

Goodness, listen to me. "*One learns a greater respect*"—pretty language and formal words, etcetera. I am beginning to sound like my wife! Not that that is surprising, given how her company is often the only company I surround myself with.

There I go again, clumsy sentences and doubled words. I was never taught the finer points of language in a fancy school: poor orphan, remember? My love, she…

We could not have begun more differently. I cannot stress this enough. I was born in a bloody alleyway in the dark and damp and cold of the city's poorest sector. She was born in light and in warmth, and *literally* ate from a silver spoon for most of her childhood. She never wanted for anything.

Sometimes I envy her. But sometimes she envies me as well—not necessarily for my upbringing itself, but rather for the strength of character it gave me.

What is that saying again? What doesn't kill you makes you stronger? No, that's not it. My wife can quote it for me: *per aspera ad astra*.

They didn't give language lessons down in the slums. But she told me, once, what it meant.

I don't remember. I think—something about the stars?

Command me to be well.

Often in the days before the reckoning my wife and I would go down to our door and watch the sun set, red spilling blood across verdant fields. The sun, fat and heavy in the sky, seemed to take an age to finally sink below the horizon and cast the land into blessed darkness.

Many times we would stay out only until the first stars appeared, glimmering pinpricks of light spreading in their eternal tapestry. Those were the days where we would fall into bed early, laughing; a tangle of limbs spilling light onto the bedclothes. But some days we would gaze at the moon chasing the sun's lingering trail until the stars overhead wheeled in and out of existence; until the rosy fingers of dawn reached out to paint the sky in glorious streaks of gold and all seemed to turn to fire in the first light of the day.

In those days we never seemed to tire—not of each other, certainly, but not of the world itself either. It was all candles flickering honey-like and soft, the taunting tongues of flame licking at air like a cat laps at milk; all dark rustling of animals in the undergrowth and movement against sheets; all fingers reaching out for a dream; soft, a sigh.

It was under that self-same sky that we would tend to our fields: overabundant and overripe, overflowing with produce until it all turned to decay. We would till and sow, weed and water. Gently, with the carefulness borne from the knowledge that something will soon be dead.

That was everything in those days. Dead, I mean. Or dying, at any rate.

But still, there is something to be said about the tenderness of growth. Something to be said about watering the fields by hand, about plucking ripe harvest from the vine and placing it upon the

tongue, bursting in a riot of heady warmth. Something to be said about the act of caring. Even if it all turns to rot in the end.

This is hungry work.

Intimacy can only last us for so long. One cannot live on touch alone, much as I long to.

But the outside world is cold. The outside world throws stone and broken glass; throws harsh words like the wind; throws cruelty like an afterthought. One cannot live on touch alone, and our vines have grown rotten.

Now do you understand my violence? When faced with heartlessness, it is I—the I who did not know a loving touch for years; the I whose heart beats out of her chest with passion, with fury, with revival—who feels it the most. And I respond in kind, because my blood rushes louder than my head. Violence is, after all, a crime of passion.

The looks from the corners of cold eyes. The sidesteps, and the refusals to move out of the way. The words muttered under breaths when they think we cannot hear. The words said out loud because the people do not think of us as *human* enough to care.

Each of these I meet with my body. I collect bruises like a noblewoman collects jewels; star-studded rubies winking from each of my knuckles in the light of the setting sun. I learn to love the taste of copper.

My wife worries. She would rather I not fight at all. But I am only a vessel for my heart, and it is my heart that yearns for justice. Justice in a world that will not fight for us. Justice in a world that despises us, a world that has never been on our side.

Oh, what am I saying? The world is beautiful and wonderful when we are alone in it. It is the *people* who have never been on our side.

But a world does not exist without people.

We were born sick, you heard them say it.

She doesn't need to speak for me to know what she is saying: the angry slant to her pale brows and tense bird-boned shoulders speak for themselves. *How dare you assume for me, how dare you believe that I would say or do anything to hurt you?*

And in return, through quirked head and narrowed eyes, I know she sees my response. *Of course I dare-of course I dare! I know you like I know myself and you would not do it intentionally but yes, you would and you have and you will hurt me for the sake of your own pride.*

Pride? Is that what this is about? Are you so afeared of wounding your own that you must conversely blame everything on mine?

Wounding my pride? Damn you, damn you, damn you and your pride all to hell. I am not the one whose pride has cost us—

Cost us nothing! Cost us only our hard outer shells that we offer the world, cost us only the outer layer of skin, cost us only the facade we present. Or have you something else to offer the hungry mouths of the world, something else that will not destroy us?

I open and shut my mouth. What can I say? This is a well-trodden argument: it is a testament to our closeness that we can even perform this pantomime of intimacy, this fight without words. We argue without ever once raising our voices.

Perhaps sensing my hesitancy, my wife moves forward as careful and silent as a ghost. She takes my arm with one delicate hand, white-gold filigree against burnished bronze, and brushes her pianist's fingers over the bones of my elbow. The hairs on my arms prickle, and raise. She speaks, and her voice is a quiet rasp that belies none of the tension previously present in either of our bodies.

"My love," she says, and I understand.

What is pride? Only love half-slain, wounded; only a lost child holding what she values most tight to her chest. Only the desire to possess and be possessed in return; she in I and I in her.

I stumble with a sob and am caught in her arms. Her nails rake gently down the shiver of my spine. *My love, my love, my love.*

There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin.

We fall into each other like beasts of the wild: gaping maw and devouring mouth; *my, what big teeth you have*! All the better to consume you with, my dear; to pull you apart and wring you dry, then put you back together piece by piece.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways—tongues and teeth and scrape of canines against jaw; one, two, three. Sharp pain of claws draw pinpricks of heat on smooth skin, scratch long lines like pathways down back. Four, five. Arch of the neck reveals jugular to sky, bared like a night unshielded by clouds. Six. Is this how it goes?

She sinks to the ground, and the dull thud of bone against wood is enough to reverberate through my body. Fingers comb through hair like rocks in water, parting silver-gold streams that fall to the floor. Her lips are a scarlet rose, unfurled; tongue wicked and sharp like the edge of a blade—or just an edge, a cliff's edge, an edge I am falling over with one quick movement. She grins at me, and her mouth is full of warmth.

I follow her down to the floor, knees cold and marrow aching. What can I offer but absolution, tinged with blood, with pain, with tears? Only she can draw this from me. Only she can take what wounds and make it into something holy.

I lean forward, and bare my teeth. She only draws me closer.

In the madness and soil of that sad earthly scene,

In times of high tension, my love tends towards avoidance rather than confrontation: she prefers to go unnoticed, whereas I am eager to right any wrongs.

That's why it's so surprising when my wife swings first.

A distant part of me takes note of her technique—sloppy, untrained, but clearly full of passion; she's going to fracture a finger if she doesn't close her fist; oh, good *girl*, she tensed her fist just in time—but a larger part of me is moving forward unconsciously, reaching

out to my love as if I can stop her. As if I can stop her! God, I have never been able to deny her anything.

Her swing connects with a satisfying *crunch,* and her offender stumbles backwards, clutching at their bloody nose. My wife shakes her hand out with a grim smile and settles into an eerily familiar stance—*my* stance—,as if to ask, *Who's next*?

As my love readies herself for another blow, blood gleaming on her knuckles like rubies, I catch her by the arm. She pauses at my touch and gives me a sharp look that I have grown to associate with her stubbornness. Of all the times for my wife to begin taking after me! I shake my head. She must know—she *must* understand. We cannot be here any longer.

How odd it is to be on the other side of the table, to be coaxing a stubborn woman into doing something that she does not wish to do. Is this how my wife feels? Suddenly I understand all of her pleading looks, her gentle movements and guiding hands. Of course she wished to guide me from harm, as I wish now for her. Of course she did not want to see me hurt.

And so I take my wife by the elbow, and turn from the crowd. They are but the restless cawing of crows in the background, and my love is a seethingly furious beast struggling in my arms. But I hold her—softly, carefully—,and like the fire held at bay by the sand, she can do nothing but burn.

Only then, I am human, only then, I am clean.

I would like for you to picture a canvas.

Linen stretched taut across a wooden skeleton, bare-boned. A wrinkle, there, where some novice craftsman has made a mistake in the harnessing. Smooth out the wrinkle with the dip of your thumb, caress the fabric until it becomes plain and featureless under your touch. Take a step back and note its perfect blankness, its impressionable inadequacy.

Then watch. Pick up a paintbrush and paint, broad dark strokes slowly illuminating a dim alley, grey-black cobblestones and oil

lamps flickering moth-like in the cold night. Introduce shadow, highlight, gleam of light across slick tile. Dimension grows until the alley feels only a step away.

Dip your brush in water. Rinse off the excess, and switch it out for a smaller one. Dip it into colour: red like blood or rubies, white like the brush of an angel's wing. Outline two figures on either end: one standing, the other collapsed on the ground. There's no need to paint their bodies in detail: a mere suggestion of shape will do. The red-bronze of the collapsed figure need only be a swirl of paint; the white-gold only a few brushstrokes up, and down. What matters most is their distance, or conversely, their closeness. See how they reflect? See how one contrasts the other? The dark fallen figure, sprawled away; the warm golden light, curved towards.

Almost complete. Now, take your smallest brush yet, and pick a colour that has no tone, or depth, or form. Take that colour and carefully brush the bones of an outstretched hand. One figure, shapeless and formless, reaches out to the other. Their bodies are vague, indistinct, immaterial. Their hands are always reaching.

Now, take a step back. Look at them. Perhaps the colours are not quite right—that is no matter. You can always paint over the figures. But the hands—the hands! No, they must stay the same. The hands must always stay the same. The longing is always the same.

Look! The paint on the canvas is still wet.

This is a tragedy. You know how it ends.

—oh, good God, let me give you my life.

UNTITLED

ZIPZAPZOOM

Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene

IT STARTS AS IT OFTEN DOES, IN THE MURK OF A NIGHTCLUB.

There's the *thump, thump, thump* of the 808. The spinning and flashing of coloured lights. The smell of hard liquor.

Her well-worn Doc Martens shine like an oil slick as she slips through the crowd, as if a fish through water, one foot crossing over the other in a grapevine motion. She wears faded black denim, straight cut hugging her upper thighs. The soft skin of her abdomen is laid bare but for the leather jacket thrown around her waist, the outline of an iris inked on her stomach. Bony shoulders jut out from the edges of her cropped military-style tank.

In the haze of the smoke machine, her straw-blonde curls light up like a halo.

She slinks up to the bar with an empty cocktail glass in hand, placing it down with a quiet *clunk* and resting both her elbows on the cool wooden surface. It's a nice contrast to the rest of the place, which runs *hot*—the warmth of the lights, the burn of the alcohol, the press of bodies. The people, sometimes.

Speaking of the people.

There's a young woman, perched on a barstool like a wren on a blade of grass. She's average-looking and yet nothing short of beautiful, with tawny brown hair, a smattering of freckles, and fine, narrow features. There's something tired about her, something heavy. Something that speaks to a hole in her chest, asking to be filled.

The blonde catches her gaze, and holds it. Tilts her head.

The other girl blinks, glancing back over her shoulder. She looks back, a question in her eyes, and is met with a cool smile. The blonde cocks her head, something in her dark brown eyes

unhurried and warm. She gestures back towards the dance floor, holding her mark's gaze, before hopping off the bar stool and retreating back into the crowd. She casts the other girl one more look over her shoulder, an invitation to follow.

The mark is frozen for a few moments, a light flush dusting her cheeks. She downs the rest of her drink as if she ought to be sorry she hadn't finished it already, as if she's already transgressed in some way by keeping the blonde waiting for even a second.

She's choosing to follow, she thinks. She needs this, she thinks.

(She never stood a chance. This, she *knows*.)

The tired girl pushes her way through the throng of fellow drunkards, struggling to fight her way through the press of bodies. Her heart thunders in her chest, far outpacing the pounding of the bass. The air feels electric as her eyes skip from stranger to stranger, anticipation building as she searches for *her*.

Her breath catches as she spots her. In the same moment, the lights begin to flash:

off on off on off on off on off on off on

As the blonde tosses her head back

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

And its as if she is so overwhelmingly beautiful

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

That the frame rate of the universe drops

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

Unable to render her smoothly

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

She looks up into the lights as if she can see God there

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

Before her eyes scrunch closed

off on off on off on off on off on off on

And she screams a lyric at the top of her lungs

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

A giddy smile that reaches her eyes pulling at the corners of her lips

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

The tired girl approaches her cautiously

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

Like cosmic dust orbiting a white dwarf

off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on off

onnnnnnnnnNNNNNNNNN–

The flashing stops. The world feels searingly bright.

The other girl gasps as her hand is taken, her arm is pulled. She feels unsteady on her feet. She doesn't think it's because of the alcohol.

The blonde tugs on her sleeve, spins her around, pulls her in. Now that the tired girl is so close to her, there's a restlessness at the back of her skull that says: *danger, danger, danger*.

But the girl's eyes say: *mine, mine, mine*.

And screw it, she wants to be *someone's*.

So there's the press of skin. The clutching of hands at the other's waist, the threading of fingers through hair. There's the tease of a tongue that promises fire and brimstone to come across chapped lips. The parting, the catching of breath, the sharing of air as their foreheads rest against the other's.

There's a squeeze of a hand. A mischievous smile.

And the song says: *"So come with me, come with me now, yeah."*

What follows is the turning of seasons. The breaking of a heart.

And then, there's the smell of fresh linen.

The blonde sits on the edge of the bed, her new lover's varsity jacket thrown over her shoulders, the sun hitting the strip of skin between her clavicle and her stomach in slatted stripes. There's a cup of brewed chai in her hands, held carefully with both hands.

Her lover, a man with dark skin and neatly trimmed facial hair, is reaching behind his neck to fasten the clasp on a gold vermeil necklace. He glances back at her reflection in the mirror. "How is it?"

"Good."

Her voice is quiet. His hands still for a moment, frozen in the middle of his attempt to fish for the loop at the end of the chain. "Yeah?"

"Mm-hm."

He fixes the necklace and adjusts the collar of his shirt. He hasn't worked her out yet. When he first met her, she projected nothing but confidence. Knowing her had felt like facing down a forest fire: destructive, mesmerising, exhilarating. He'd craved her destruction, needed cleansing. It was only ever meant to be something effortless and brief, but she'd delighted in toying with him, wrapping him around her finger and keeping him there, a hot and cold dance he couldn't resist. Not when it's her.

But in quiet moments, especially in the morning, she's different. Unsure of herself. There's something uneasy in her gaze, something he's only caught glimpses of before. In this moment, it's just as brief, but for a second, her eyes seem darker. Hollow, maybe. Circles are more pronounced.

The hair rises on the back of his neck. It's like he's seen something he's not supposed to, despite being *intimately* familiar with all of her. He hesitates, before asking: "You feeling okay?"

And then the look fades instantly, like the steam of the chai curling and melting into the air, and she smiles, sly and slippery. "*Psh*, of course. Why, are you feeling sore? You throw your back out or something?" Her tongue is sharp and defensive; her fire burns *hotter*, rising until the flames turn into an impenetrable wall.

He scoffs. "No. You just seem…" he trails off, letting the fact that she *seems* at all speak for itself.

"What? I'm fine. Just a bit restless. Hey, maybe we could go out tonight?"

He looks at her, tries to *see* her again, feeling something stab at his chest. For a while, his friends have tried to tell him she's not what he needs.

And for a moment, he's not sure if she's what *she* needs, either.

There's the heady thump of the kick drum. The gritty drawl of a Les Paul, lightly distorted.

The girl sits on the back of a chair, tilted back and resting against the wall, one foot on the edge of a table. Behind her is a poster advertising another local gig, depicting a massive pair of wings that splay out across the wall of the dimly lit venue. Her eyes are fixed on the guitarist, something in her gut stirring.

Her toe taps against the inside of her boot, too quickly for it to be to the beat of the song.

She catches the eye of the bartender. He knows her. He knows her glass is empty. His gaze seems to ask: *Another?*

She glances back at the guitarist.

Another.

DON'T TAKE THIS THE WRONG WAY

TESSA MILLETT

Someone New

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" OLLIE TRIED NOT TO LET THEIR VOICE crack at this serious juncture. "I will *not* get on that stupid dating app, especially after you went behind my back and installed it on my phone for me!"

Ollie wasn't *actually* angry. They knew that their roommate Coralie was trying to help in her own pushy way and normally it was kind of endearing.

But with stuff like this, Ollie knew to put up at least a token resistance. *Otherwise*, she'd get it in her head that there wouldn't be any objection and do something ridiculous—like that time she painted their last apartment with glittery pink paint.

God, the landlord had been *insufferable* after that.

"But—" Her voice was teasing, drawing out the single syllable, "You're lonely. It's been *five* years since Melanie dumped you. It's time!"

"…Fine." They ignored the want to protest, "But *I'm* making my profile, not you."

She leaned forward, as if conspiring, "Can I at least pick the pictures?"

"No."

"Please?" The innocence that seeped into her voice was almost enough to get him to agree—

"*Hell* no."

She pouted and Ollie was successful in their stance for barely ten seconds, before they relented a little. "I get veto power." They hesitated, "Nothing shirtless—I don't want to attract that kind of attention, even if it's post-top surgery."

"Fi-ine," she said in a sing-song tone—she picked up her phone and scrolled to Facebook to pick out good photos.

Five hours later—having fully forgotten the previous conversation and starting to consider going to bed—Ollie was startled when Coralie ran into their room proclaiming,, "I got it! You should get the email in about twenty-five—" her speech was cut off by the ding of a notification on their phone.

After glancing at it, they groaned. "I don't look good in any of these!"

"You said I got to find the photos!"

Running a hand over their face, Ollie said, "Look, I know you think my loneliness is your responsibility, but *please* for the love of all that is holy stop trying to fix me!"

As soon as they said it, they knew it was a mistake. Coralie's face dropped, and she stuttered for a few seconds before retreating to her room.

Ollie wanted to stop her, but something in their gut wouldn't let them.

As it turned out, that "something" was guilt.

"I am officially the worst friend ever," Ollie mumbled. "She's never gonna forgive me."

Even as they stewed and brooded, they finally realized that they had to do something to make it up to her. So they opened their email, downloaded the attached pictures and opened the *stupid* dating app.

Once they finished creating their profile, they went to Coralie's room and knocked.

Her voice was hoarse, "*What*?"

"I—" Ollie hesitated for a moment before saying, "I can't do it. I can't hit submit on the stupid app."

There was a long pause before the door opened, during which Ollie tore themself apart silently for having been so cruel. Then Coralie opened the door. Her face was still the picture of sadness, down to the tear streaks on her cheeks. However, she looked at him silently, head cocked to one side in confusion.

"Because—because I'm *scared*. I got out of the worst relationship of my life, and then I was alone so long that I decided it was better that way. But I hurt you by lashing out so maybe I was wrong…"

Coralie softened. "You deserve to be happy. And I know you are right now, but I also see how you look at couples on the street. I can tell you want that, and I know you deserve to find someone, or someones, if that's your thing."

Shocked by the sentiments and the sincerity, Ollie teared up.

A moment later, so did Coralie. "You're the best pain in the ass roommate I could have hoped for, do you know that?"

"I know, that's why you keep me around despite the pain in the assery."

She jokingly swatted at their shoulder, which they countered by stepping into a hug. After a squeak of surprise, she said, "Ok, I love you too and all, but you came here for a reason, so give me your phone."

Faking a groan, Ollie handed it over and after a brief moment of typing, Coralie handed it back.

"Now start swiping."

A half hour later, their phone pinged with a match.

It was one of the people they had swiped on because she was cute and because she mentioned liking sushi. Her name was Wren. As they sat on their bed, debating what to send as an opening message, she beat them to it.

Hi!!! It's nice to meet you! I saw you do computer coding, I'm really impressed.

Ollie responded after a moment, *Do you code?*

The response was quick. *No but I think it's super cool that you do. I'm more of a history buff, and I love seeing why other people do what they do.*

A smile creased their face. *I think history is super cool. I just can't do the names and dates.*

Oh, I just love the stories. History is just the stories we tell ourselves about the past after all…

Their messages flew by until at one point Wren mentioned something unusual. *Hey, Ollie, I want to ask something.*

Hmm?

Do you know what polyamory is?

Yeah, it's being able to be in love with multiple people. My coworker is polyam; she explained it to me a few years ago.

Oh good. Do you think you could date someone who was polyamorous?

Ollie paused for just a second before saying, *Absolutely depends on the person. But if you're saying what I think you are, I would love to meet up with you. I really like talking to you and I want to get to know you in person.*

That's a relief! I was worried that you might not want to date me because of it.

I am still nervous. Not you, I just have had bad luck dating. But I want to get to know you at least.

Ollie could almost hear their enthusiasm through the phone when their next message came in: *That's amazing!!!!!!! Do you want to get sushi tomorrow at the Dive Bar?*

The seven exclamation points seemed excessive, but at least she was enthusiastic.

Ollie was 15 minutes early to the Dive Bar, a restaurant that served seafood and arguably the best sushi in town.Despite how early they thought they were, they saw Wren standing by the door, fiddling with the zipper of her purse. They raised a hand and shouted, "Hi!"

Wren started, glanced up, and softened. "Hi Ollie! I was worried you were gonna be late but then I saw I was an hour early, and, well—hi."

They laughed. "You've been here for forty five minutes?"

"I never remembered to change my clock after Daylight Savings," she admitted, looking flustered.

They bantered about how silly Daylight Savings was, and Ollie teased Wren about not trusting the clock on her smartphone, and soon enough (or too soon, more accurately), dinner was over. Wren was fiddling with her purse zipper again, and said, "I had a lot of fun, Ollie."

"I did too." Then, suddenly feeling brave, Ollie said, "Would you like to come to my place for a movie night? Coralie—that's the pain in the neck roommate who I promised to bring a roll home for—and I do it every Friday night, but she told me that she wouldn't mind if you came."

Wren lit up. "Really? That would be great."

As they left the restaurant, Ollie heard the song playing over the speakers outside. "*And so I fall in love just a little bit, little bit, every-day with someone new…*"

They thought to themself, as they listened to Wren discuss in length the difference between the musical and the book versions of *The Phantom of the Opera*, that maybe they would give this whole love thing another try.

And *maybe* even keep trying.

Honey, we should run away.

Oh, someday.

FROM EDEN

YENNA

From Eden

SHE DREAMED OF EDEN AGAIN.

And sometimes, when the nights were kind, she wondered if it had started with her.

If that first step, that first reach, that first bite was really the beginning of everything falling apart. But the more she thought about it, the more she started to believe it was also the start of something else. Not just the loss, but the knowing. The becoming. There was something kind in that, terrible yes, but freeing too. Like maybe she hadn't ruined everything. Maybe she'd just seen too much of the truth to stay blind to it.

Maybe Eden was never about perfection.

Maybe it was about innocence. And maybe losing that wasn't the end, but the start of learning how to find beauty even outside the garden.

It never came all at once, those dreams—just little fragments, soft and slippery, like sunlight sneaking in through the cracks of some place she hadn't seen in years. When she woke up, it clung to her chest like a weight. Not in a bad way. More like it didn't want to let go. Like it was trying to remind her of something she used to know. Something familiar she couldn't quite name.

It felt like… before.

Before everything got heavy. Before the grief. Before the world got so sharp around the edges.

Like a memory that didn't belong to this life, but still lived somewhere deep inside her.

The dream was always kind of the same, but never exactly. She was always barefoot, walking through soft dirt that smelled like rain, that smelled like her old garden. The grass was warm, like it

had been napping in the sun. The trees were old—older than she could explain—and somehow gentle, like they'd seen too much to ever be cruel. Their roots twisted like stories too ancient to tell. The fruit they carried hung low, sweet in a way that almost hurt. And the air… it was full of laughter.

Hers. His. Theirs. It sounded like birds, and wind, and the kind of happiness that makes your heart ache just a little. There was warmth, too. Not the kind that burns, but the kind that holds you.

Something safe. A peace so quiet, it felt like sorrow had never been invented.

But then she'd blink, or breathe, or reach out—and it would all slip away. Like smoke. Like morning mist that disappears the second you try to hold onto it. And still, the ache would stay. That awful, beautiful ache. Like she'd lost something precious. Like something had kissed her and left a mark she couldn't wash off. It wasn't just missing a place. It was missing a time. A feeling.

A version of herself that had only ever existed there.

She woke up with it wrapped around her like fog. The dream stuck to her skin, even as the day moved on. It felt like trying to remember a song she used to know by heart. Like reaching for a memory that maybe never really belonged to her—but still hurt to lose. Somewhere deep in her, something remembered. Something knew. She had belonged to that place once. Even if it wasn't real. Even if it had never been.

And it was never just a dream.

It was a story, a song, a thread that ran through her blood. It followed her like an echo, like a prayer passed down over lifetimes. She and the one she loved—they had always been chasing it. That garden. That peace. That beginning. And no matter how many times they lived, how many bodies they wore, they could never quite get back to it. The world kept changing, but they stayed the same: searching. Wandering. Lost. Sometimes they were lovers. Sometimes strangers. Sometimes ghosts passing each other by. But they were never free. Not really.

The curse followed them. It always had. Tied to them by something no one could see, but they both felt. It didn't fade with time or soften with distance. It just grew heavier the further they ran. Even when they tried to disappear, tried to drown in the wide, quiet places of the world, the curse was always there. Waiting. Whispering.

There were no happy endings for them. No safe harbor. No home.

Just the ache. Just the dream. Just the endless, aching memory of something perfect they had once touched, and lost.

And still, as she lay there in the soft hush of morning light, she couldn't help but wonder—maybe that was the point. Maybe the dream, the ache, the curse… maybe they weren't just things happening to her. Maybe they were a part of her. Maybe they were supposed to stay. To haunt, to echo.

Maybe they were never meant to fade.

It felt like a song she couldn't stop humming, even though the lyrics had slipped away years ago. Like the ache of Eden—this half-remembered place she couldn't name, but still carried in the corners of her heart. A place that might not even be real anymore, if it ever was. But somehow, she loved it anyway. Missed it anyway.

Over time, the feeling of being cast out settled in. Slow and quiet, like the tide creeping up her legs until she was chest-deep in it, until it became part of how she existed. At first, it had been unfamiliar, just a strange emptiness in her chest, something she couldn't explain when the world around her fell quiet. But eventually, it became the air she breathed. It lived in her, quietly, steadily, like background noise she forgot was even there.

Some mornings, though, she'd wake up and it would be gone.

And those mornings felt like a gift. Not joy, exactly—just a soft kind of peace. A break. The sun would rise, golden and gentle, and the heaviness would lift, just a little. It wasn't gone, but it was… out of reach. And for a moment, she could pretend. Pretend she hadn't lost anything. That there'd never been a tear in the fabric of her life. She'd walk through her day like someone whole, like someone who had never been cut off from the place she called home.

But the quiet never lasted.

Eventually, it always came back. And when it did, it hit hard—like getting the wind knocked out of you when you weren't even bracing for it. One moment you're okay, and the next it's like this cold gust cuts through you, straight past everything you thought you'd healed. Just like that, the weight's back. Heavy. Too much. And no matter how much you try to outrun it or shove it down, it's there. Right under the surface. Waiting. And when it breaks through, it swallows you whole.

Because exile isn't just about leaving. It's about knowing deep down that there's no going back. It's a kind of grief that doesn't fade, it just gets quieter until it doesn't. It's missing something you can't reach anymore, not really. Feeling like people see you, but not who you *actually* are. Like you're just a shadow of the person you used to be, drifting through places that don't quite fit.

And that feeling? It doesn't go away. So she learned to carry it. It got into her bones. It became part of how she moved, how she lived. Like this extra layer she never asked for, but couldn't take off. Some days, she didn't even notice it anymore. She just adapted—made space for it. Figured out how to exist around it.

Until one day, she realized she wouldn't know who she was without it.

But there were still those days—*the slow, quiet ones*—when the memories would come flooding back, uninvited. Faces she missed. Voices she'd give anything to hear again. That deep green of hills rolling on forever beneath a sky so wide it could swallow you whole. The warmth of the ground beneath her bare feet. The sound of laughter—free and easy, like it used to be.

And when those memories hit, they hit hard. That kind of grief never stays gentle. It tore through her, left her curled in on herself, holding tight to whatever pieces she still had. There were moments it felt like she might break completely, like her chest couldn't hold the weight of what she'd lost.

That's what exile does to you.

It doesn't just take you away from something. It takes something out of you. Leaves you raw, uncertain. A shadow of the person you used to be. Someone who remembers too much and cannot go back.

Still… in between the waves, in the quiet stretches, something else would stir. Something small but steady. A reminder. A quiet hope.

She was still here. Still breathing. Still walking. Even if the world didn't quite fit the way it used to, she hadn't disappeared. Not completely.

She was changed. Marked. But not erased.

And the exile? It didn't go away. It never would. But she'd learned to live with it. Let it sit beside her instead of inside her.

And some days, when it all became too much, she wept. Not loudly. Not with drama. Just quietly, the way people do when they know the tears won't change anything. She cried for what was gone, for what she could never return to. Even as the tears dried, she knew: exile was hers now. Her burden. Her companion. Her ghost. Her grief.

And grief didn't arrive all at once. It crept in slowly, like dusk bleeding into daylight—unnoticed, until the light was already gone. It didn't come with screams or thunder. It came softly, like a bruise blooming under skin, dull at first, then impossible to ignore.

Some days, it felt gentle, like a tide brushing her ankles. It tugged at her, left her breathless, but didn't pull her under. She could walk with it. Smile through it. Pretend, just for a moment, that she hadn't lost everything. That the world was still whole. That Eden hadn't been taken from her. That she hadn't fallen.

But then came the anger.

It was sudden and fierce. Not a tide, but a storm. It slammed into her like a slammed door, like a scream trapped in her chest. Anger at the world, at fate, at herself. At how quickly paradise had slipped away, how easily it had been shattered. How could something so sacred vanish without warning? How could love be so fragile, so disposable?

She tasted bitterness in everything. Food, memory, breath, scents… She stood in the ruins of what had been and screamed into the silence, hoping the echoes would carry some of the rage away. But anger burned fast, and once it passed, it left her hollow. Empty.

Just a body remembering loss.

And then came the bargaining. That quiet, desperate voice inside her that whispered, *"What if?"*

"What if I could go back? What if I had chosen differently? What if there's still a way to make it right?"

She replayed every step, every word, looking for cracks to seal, paths to retrace. But there was no going back. Eden was gone. The doors had closed behind her, and all she could do was walk forward.

Acceptance didn't feel like peace. It didn't soothe her. It wasn't forgiveness, either. It was a cold, sharp knowing, a surrender not to healing, but to reality. She stopped fighting it. Stopped looking for meaning. Stopped asking why.

She let grief stay.

It didn't get easier, exactly. But she learned how to move with it, how to breathe through the weight. The grief didn't leave, but it stopped trying to devour her. It just sat beside her, a quiet, constant presence.

And even then, even after all that, she asked herself: did she regret it?

Had love been worth the ruin?

Had Eden been worth the exile?

She didn't know how to answer. Love was supposed to heal. Wasn't it? But this love had undone her. Had lifted her to heaven and then left her in the ashes. Still, when she closed her eyes, the memory was there. The warmth, the light, the joy. Not gone. Just unreachable.

And maybe that was the cruelest part: it had been *real*.

It had been *good*.

She still heard the song, echoing somewhere in her—*"I fell for you. I fell for you."* And she had. Hard. Fully. Without holding back. The fall had broken her. But it had also taught her what it meant to feel. And maybe that mattered.

She didn't regret the love. Not really. The pain, the exile, the ache, they were all wrapped up in it now, impossible to separate. But the love itself? That still lived inside her.

Quiet and steady. Untouchable.

She had walked in Eden once. That truth remained. And no grief, no distance, no exile could erase it.

And then, one day, she found the cathedral.

It rose before her like a quiet song, an old hymn whispered just beneath the breath. Something sacred, something almost forgotten. Its stone ribs reached up, tall and strong, standing over her like it had grown from the earth itself. Ivy crawled all over its walls, wild and stubborn, as if nature had once tried to take back what hands long gone had built. The cathedral felt alive in a soft way, just like her dear and beloved garden.

The gentle sigh of wind slipping through broken glass, the smell of wet earth and moss, and something else, something sweeter, something she couldn't quite name but felt deep inside… It was Eden. Or whatever was left of it.

Her heart beat strangely in her ribcage, part awe, part sorrow, as she stepped inside.

Time seemed to fold over itself inside this great holy space, past and present mixing together in the warm, golden light spilling through the shattered stained glass window. Sunbeams caught dust floating in the air, turning it into tiny glowing embers, drifting slowly like pieces of the world she used to know, used to love. She gently reached towards one of the beams, as if it could bring her the warmth from that home she dearly missed.

For a brief moment, she thought she heard it.

Her dear, beloved, lost Eden.

The rustle of leaves in a long-forgotten garden, the soft brush of something ancient against her skin, like a dream she almost remembered. A voice, maybe her own, called her name, but it wasn't the voice from before, not the one from when the world was whole and she was unbroken. This voice was older, worn by time, but still held something tender, something she recognized deep down.

Something that used to warm her bones, made her chest feel lighter.

She closed her eyes, breathed in the heavy, sacred holy air, and almost felt the sun's pure warmth again. The gentle touch she once craved, the comfort of a place she could never go back to.

The cathedral was broken, but sacred all the same. It had lived through everything. The grief, the joy, the love, the loss. And it still stood there. This wasn't something of this world, but something between worlds, where memory lives and time can't erase the echoes of what once was.

Her feet carried her further into the heart of the cathedral, and her eyes fell on the shards of stained glass—once alive with light and colors, now scattered like broken dreams across the floor. The colors, emerald green, deep violet, sapphire blue, still caught the light, but differently now. They glimmered like fragments of that old Eden. Trapped in time, shattered, and never quite whole again.

The glass had been broken by storms, by years pressing down like heavy hands. But even in its brokenness, it didn't lose its beauty. If anything, it seemed to shine with a quiet kind of sorrow. As if to remind her that even when things fall apart, there's still something sacred worth holding onto.

Her fingers found the cold stone of the altar, tracing the deep cracks caused by centuries of wind and rain. Caused by centuries of heavy hands and heavier books. This altar, place of offerings and prayers, now sits like a forgotten relic of time. The surface was carved with names long erased from memory and she felt a pull toward it. Like it was somehow the place where everything had started, and where everything had quietly ended.

Then the memories rushed in as she brushed the worn stone. Memories of ghosts that wouldn't let her rest.

They came in sharp flashes, fragments of a life she once lived, of a paradise she'd lost. She could feel the weight of the fruit in her hands again, heavy and real, like the very heartbeat of the earth. It had been so sweet, so full of promise, that the memory still burned inside her chest.

She could almost taste it, still feel its warmth, still feel its sharp bite… like it had never left her. That fruit had been a blessing and a curse all at once, something she'd longed for with everything she had, something she'd believed in completely.

She remembered the serpent's voice, twisting around her like smoke. Soft, smooth, and tempting. It had promised freedom, a kind of truth she'd never dared hope for. *"You're meant for more than this"*, it had whispered, wrapping around her like silk, offering a choice she never thought possible. *"You're destined for something greater. Something without limits."*

Those words had seared themselves into her soul, like a prophecy she couldn't ignore. And she had believed them. Oh, how deeply she had believed.

The weight of it pressed down on her again. Grief she'd thought she'd left behind, but that never really went away.

How could she have been so naïve?

How could she have given herself so fully to something that had been nothing but smoke and mirrors, nothing but the echo of a dream that had never truly been hers to begin with?

And yet—Was it truly a lie, if it sang so sweetly?

The serpent had not bared fangs, nor hissed in threats. No. He had spoken in honeyed riddles, in verses that trembled like harp strings in the wind. Soft as moss beneath her bare feet, low as a secret told beneath the boughs of fig and flame.

"You are not made for silence," he had whispered, his breath smelling of crushed petals and ash. *"Not for obedience, nor dust. You*

were carved of marrow and fire—don't you feel it? The ache in your bones that no prayer can soothe?"

And she had. *Oh, she had.*

She had felt it in every glance cast toward the horizon, in every quiet rebellion that bloomed like bruises against the pale parchment of her days. She had felt it in her longing, a longing not just to know, but to become.

"The fruit is not death," he had said, voice coiled in silk, *"It is becoming. It is awakening."*

And hadn't it been?

Hadn't the world changed after?

… Hadn't *she*?

The pain had come, yes, in exile's echo, in the split in her soul that no balm could stitch, in the cold nights where even stars seemed distant, judgmental things.

But for a moment—before the weight of consequence descended like a shroud on her soul, there had been light. *A raw, blinding, beautiful light.*

For a heartbeat, she had been more than dust and obedience.

She had been limitless.

"They'll call it a sin," he had said, smiling like cracked moonlight, *"But that's just a name for what they fear. They fear what you are becoming."*

She pressed her hand flat against the stone, as if by touch alone she could summon the shape of that moment. As if she could freeze this moment.

The rupture, the fall, the first taste of truth.

Her mouth still remembered its sweetness. Her heart still bore the wound.

Was it naïveté that had led her here… or was it courage?

The serpent had vanished with the garden. His voice lingered, but not as poison this time. It lingered as a memory. Memory etched

into her like the veins of leaves, like scripture written in reverse.
Lingered like the ivy climbing up the stone, filling its cracks.

Like a song she could never unhear.

And perhaps, some truths are worth the ruin.

TO FREEZE AND TO THAW

Shay Galloway

In A Week

WHITE BLIND. SNOW, ICE, WIND, UNLIKE ANY URH HAD witnessed before. Even his layers of furs and skin were ineffective in this cold—like thousands of needles in his face, one for each pore. Nose and fingers and toes that are so cold he could no longer feel them. One step. Another. He should turn back.

How long had he been walking? How many times had the sun risen and set?

He could not recall.

The white cold blurred it all into one never-ending moment.

He should not have left them, Ahn and the baby. He should have stayed in the cave with her, waited until they were strong enough to move again. Waited for the warmer season. But they could not survive alone. They needed a pack. With the loss of theirs, one by one, the cold bit harder, the food more difficult to catch. Many eyes could scan more ground. Many hands made quick work. Fire, shelter, warmth. They alone could not make enough, make it fast enough. Not with Ahn weakened by birth. Not with a pup to keep warm and milk-full. He should not have left them.

So cold. So tired. So heavy. He stumbled, feet sinking in the snow. He lay down, reached inside his cloak, clutching the portion of Ahn's braid tucked against his chest. As the world around him grew whiter still, his eyes drew closed, overtaken by a drowning warmth.

The cavern entrance, barely wide enough for Ada to squeeze through with her gear, was wet, dripping with melt. She was a little disappointed she and her team weren't the first to discover the cave—at least in the last ten thousand years. That would go to

the ice climbers who had alerted the park. The receding glacier had revealed a long-forgotten cave. And human remains.

She preferred warmer excavations. Who didn't? Trekking over a glacier tied to a train of others and crampons was not her forte. She knew she should mourn the loss of the glaciers—and she did of course, in what that meant for the overall state of the world as humanity knew it. But the ice held so many secrets suspended in time, what secrets she and her cohort could learn and know about their long-lost ancestors if it was all revealed—for better or worse.

Feet planted *terra firma*, Ada and her team clicked on headlights and followed the park guide. The heavy scent of ancient air, frigid without the warmth of the glacier-eating sunshine outside. The park guide stopped. "There," he said, pointing to a dark mass tucked at the back of the hollow, hardly more than a mild disturbance on the cavern floor.

She approached slowly, headlight defining the mass to specifics: some type of animal-skin shroud. Bear maybe? Wolf? Hard to tell with this level of decay. Still, given the age of the remains, the preservation was immaculate. For millennia, ice had filled the cavern, then sealed by the glacier. Ada pulled her camera from her gear bag labeled "Dr. A.H.", her team spreading across the cavern like blinding and giant fireflies, taking record of every inch of space—evidence of fire, faded etchings in the stone, each shutter click echoing. Cautious of her footing, she worked around the main find, snapping a dozen pictures with every step. Peeking from the edge of the shroud, a head, full of dark hair, matted by time.

Gloves on, gingerly, she peeled back the shroud, and gasped to see what lay beneath. A woman's body, well preserved, but that was not what made her stop, hold her breath, fall to her knees. Not just a woman, but a mother, curled lovingly around her infant, a skull so small, the fissures had not yet fused.

Ada at once felt the sweet and precious weightless weight of her own child. Saw the fuzz-lined dimple pulsating, felt the dread of knowing there was nothing she could do to save her own child, keep the life in him. In that moment she was transported to those last moments in the too-bright hospital room. Thankfully the nurses

had turned off all the machines; there was no need for them anymore. She had been alone, too. In the moment she'd made the decision to let him go. In the moment when his life had ended.

The cave was too hot, too cold, too empty of air for her lungs. The sharp despair came so suddenly, she had no time to swallow the wretched sob that welled from deep inside her. How she wished she could have been there for this ancient woman, how she wished she could cradle the small bones and give them life again, one full of warmth and wonder.

A gentle hand on her shoulder, the solemnity of her crew more palpable than the damp coolness of the cave. Ada's face, wet with the unbidden tears, burned in the cold. "Keep them together," she said. "Do not separate them."

She was no longer alone.

Ahn stood at the mouth of the cave, seeking any break in the thick endless white beyond—any speck of brown that announced Urh's return. She pulled her cloak tighter as the child nuzzled against her chest, seeking milk, seeking warmth. But the baby, so soft, so frail and hairless, had sucked the heat from her with her milk. He had sucked and sucked, drop by drop, his hunger fueling hers, leaving her empty.

She waited as long as she could. There was nothing left. There was not much left. Not food, not wood. A single stick at a time, that was all they had left. Barely enough for light. Not enough for warmth, and the cold still was dropping. Their entire pack, dead now. Beasts, illness, accidents. From cave to cave, they'd moved, one less person in their party until all who remained were her and Uhr, the old woman, and the other child, both wounded. Now even they were gone. The spare child first. Then the old woman, leaving only Ahn and the fresh baby. She'd had to drag their bodies out to the snow herself and watch the snow mound over their frail frozen bodies until they were no long distinguishable. Ahn knew it was only a matter of time she'd be joining them if Urh didn't return from his scouting soon. She had not wanted him to go, and he

had not wanted her to stay, but she had been unable to go far, the blood still oozing thick between her thighs, surely leaving a trail for whatever sharp-toothed beast to follow. Again. She shivered. So much blood so early in her child's life.

The child whimpered, starting to writhe with hunger. Ahn turned her back to the snow, to the wasteland that had taken her home and her family. She settled beside the weak fire, placing the last two sticks on the flame. Out came the breast, nipple into the baby's mouth. He latched greedily, his whimpers calming. But he would start to cry as soon as he realized he would get nothing more than a few drops.

Still, he sucked and sucked and sucked as the flame fluttered, its reach shrinking with each passing minute. In the darkness she held the baby close, so close. Closer. Too close. Close enough that maybe she could merge their bodies into one again, and he would not have to feel the cold, the hunger that awaited them at the edge of the last flame's glow.

Oren was almost sorry to say goodbye to the man he'd taken to calling Icy Old Boy. But the thrill of the reunion was unlike anything he'd experienced in his career. The body had been discovered at the foot of a receding glacier, his frame suspended in ice like a freakish art installation. It had given the hikers who found him quite a shock. As tenderly as possible, Oren and his team had cut the man from the ice, transported him back to the lab. He'd quickly written up a piece on the team's findings: an Ice Age man, holding braided locks of hair—that of an adult woman entwined with a small section of fine baby boy hair.

Weeks after the publishing of his findings, Dr. Harvey reached out, explaining she and her team had also just discovered Ice Age bodies in a cave a hundred miles up the mountain range. A woman and a baby. The woman's hair had a lock that had appeared to have been sheared.

It had been impossible to think her theory could be correct. What was the likelihood members of a family would be found

so separately? But they did the testing, and wouldn't you know, she was right. This is when he loved his work the most, stringing together the humanness across time. They put the old boy in a box, a cooler, really, secured in a box truck, which he drove himself. He'd insisted. How many stories had they speculated about these two. He, holding a lock of her hair. The baby shares DNA with them both. Who were these two, what had driven them apart in the early days of their child's life? And now here they were, bridging the distance.

All the weeks of text correspondence, emails and messenger apps with Dr. Harvey had made him want to meet her just as much (or even more) than he wanted to reunite the specimens. The ache Oren had felt in Dr. Harvey's words, the thrill of joy each notification of a new message from her had him mourning the moment it would all end. If this trade off meant the end of their correspondence, at least he would get to shake her hand, feel her corporeal realness. He could cherish their relationship as it had been. Purely professional, of course.

The interior of Uhr's eyes glowed red, back lit by the sun. Has the storm passed? He no longer felt any cold at all. In fact, he had never felt such warmth in all his life. It encompassed him. The weariness that bent him to the earth had lifted. His joints no longer ached, the skin of his face no longer burned with frost. Perhaps he had finally found another human who had brought him to their cave, their fire. The hope in his heart popped open his eyes. He must tell them about Ahn and the baby.

But there was no cave, no fire. He still lay outside. Yet the snow was gone. The world was green, speckled with color. So much color. More than he had ever seen. Small, winged things diced the air, glinting in the sunlight. What world is this? To fall asleep in desolation and wake to life, a world teeming with vibrance and wonder, a cacophony of sound and scent. How long has it been? How long could a man sleep? A day? A week?

Ahn sat up, letting his bearskin cloak fall to the ground. He reached toward the sun, letting the warmth of it drip over his fingertips,

down his bare arm, the hairs quivering in the breeze. When he stood, he expected his legs to ache and quake with all the time he'd been curled in the snow, but there was no pain. Not even the usual tightness in the muscles and tendons of his legs and angles. Around him, small, winged creatures buzzed and flitted among the vegetation. He reached toward a nearby flower and brushed his fingers along the yellow petals, soft and delicate like a baby's ear. His touch released a sweet smell that thrilled his senses. He tread forward, trailing his hands through the wildflower sea.

It was just him and the birds and the insects, it seems. Until he heard a shout, a familiar sound that carried across the vast vegetated richness. Uhr looked up, shielding his eyes against the glare of the sun.

There, in the halo of the day he saw them, Ahn and the baby.

I KEEP CATCHING THE WORDS BUT THE MEANING IS THIN

HistorianRoo

Sedated

ARROYO FELT AS THOUGH THE GODS FOUND IRONY IN HIS existence.

It wasn't the first time this thought had occurred to him–

But as he sank below the surface of the ocean, salt water filling his lungs he knew it would be his last time.

Maybe–just maybe–Arroyo was *meant* to be an irony.

A cursed being in a world of eternal brilliance and beauty.

It would not be the first time that he was declared cursed–with ears that did not hear and a voice that did not comply he was an oddity in every village, in every kingdom. As a child he relied on the kindness of strangers, as an adult he couldn't bear the thought.

Arroyo crafted his own language that no one bothered to learn–and forced himself to understand the shapes of words spoken to him, usually in anger. He learned to recognize the shape of his name, of threats, of warnings.

He became a cabin boy in his thirteenth year for a ship whose name was an impossibility to speak and worked underneath men that acted more like owners than fellow soldiers.

When Arroyo's Captain and most of the crew were lost to pirates he did not mourn their death–it should have been the first sign that the gods would take up arms against his existence.

He was seventeen and a pirate and they were more like family than anything Arroyo had ever known.

The crew did not care about his lack of words and lack of hearing.

The crew did not declare him cursed and threatened to throw him overboard every time a storm started to brew.

The crew welcomed him and he climbed the ranks.

Arroyo was twenty-three and the second mate on *The Trinity*.

Arroyo was twenty-four when he was lost to the sea.

Irony stood strongest when Arroyo stood on the bow of *The Trinity*.

If he could hear, he would know of the calls of his crew, the howl of the wind, the splash of the waves—all their own forms of warning that he had only ever been explained the sound of.

He could feel the wind brushing past him, threatening him with every gust that maybe *just maybe* this gust would be the one to pull him from the bow and into his final resting place. The sunlight danced across the water in front of him—blinding him in uneven intervals. The railing of the ship dug into his waist, a steady reminder that if he leaned any further he may tip the rest of the way—Arroyo's hands were caught in the rigging.

Or, maybe the rigging was caught in his hands.

Some idiot—Arroyo would place his tobacco rations on it being the new boy, the one with the blond hair who had no patience to share his name with his soundless Second Mate—had tugged too firmly in an effort to free the ropes, trapping them in knots that he then abandoned in favor of forcing someone else to solve the problem.

The *someone else* was always Arroyo, not that he particularly minded.

And so he leaned against the railing, wincing at the way it dug into his hips as he untangled the ropes with a patience that did not often grace pirate features. He had already been offered a knife on three occasions, despite the short time he had been working to unknot the beast of a tangle before him.

Arroyo shifted in an attempt to gain a better grip and felt his heart drop to his stomach when his boot slipped for just a moment on the deck below him.

He did not fall—and one final tug of the coarse ropes in his hands successfully unknotted the beast he had spent far too long on.

The Second Mate stepped back, absentmindedly rubbing his hands together in an attempt to free any lingering fibers from where they might stick to him.

The floorboards shifted below him—evidence of someone's approach. He turned before they reached him, smiling at the way annoyance decorated the features of the younger man—no doubt Decon wanted to scare the Second Mate, a remnant of his child-like nature and excitement that Arroyo did not mind.

Arroyo speaks with scattered syllables, a hand pressed against the base of his throat to assure himself that his vocal chords are vibrating with enough speed for words to actually pass through his lips.

"Next time maybe." It's meant as a question, though Arroyo is almost sure that it is missing the questioning lilt.

Decon rolls his eyes, but smiles nonetheless. He holds his hand out to Arroyo, smiling again when the second mate sets his hand palm up onto his. He traces letters, slowly and carefully and with wrong vowels, *S-T-E-R-M B-R-O-I-N-G*.

Arroyo nods, offering his spelling corrections in the form of his own language, smiling when Decon follows each handshape with ease, mirroring him. There is a lack of frustration and an abundance of curiosity every time Decon follows Arroyo's hands around the ship.

Arroyo steps past Decon, offering corrections in the form of stiff movements and sharp glares. The crew responds with ducked heads and closely following gazes—they were used to this, these wordless confessions in the same way that Arroyo was used to their soundless replies.

The younger man followed just behind him, the ache of the floorboards just below his feet were a constant reminder of the man's ghost-like ability to follow Arroyo.

The blond bimbo—the same who tangled the rigging into knots—has given up on his current job, ducking away and moving below deck just as the rain starts to make its presence known. Arroyo

frowns but lets him go—better he disappear below deck and make himself scarce then cause problems above deck during a storm.

Arroyo tilts his head back, eyes watching the way the storm clouds form, they twist and turn at the whim of every gust of wind. It'll be a powerful one, he's already thinking of what needs to be done, what should be tied down before it falls away completely.

He's lost to the thought of it all, lighting flashes across the sky—

And *that's* when the world falls away from him.

Arroyo doesn't know what hit him but as quickly as it does it's gone and he is falling.

It feels poetic that the last thing he should ever know is the sky above him and the sea below. He falls from the ship—hitting the water hard enough that his breath is gone and replaced with salt water in an instant.

He is lost to the sea—

A torrent of bubbles follows his wake, the undertow pulls him deeper.

The first thing he learned when he joined *The Trinity* was how to swim—how to pull his hands through the water and break out to gasp a lungful of air—he's only half successful, but it is more air than he's had in the past minutes.

The rain has started to fall—hard and fast and enough that it threatens to drown Arroyo where he struggles to float.

The second thing he learned was to call for help—

He abandons his habit of a hand at the base of his throat in favor of yelling loud enough that it hurts, unintelligible sounds in an attempt to draw attention him—

The Trinity is rocking in the waves, too far ahead of him and yet he shouts. He can see his crew on deck, eyes seeking him, pointing in an effort to save him—

Lightning flashes.

A wave crashes into him.

Named for the water, Arroyo is now lost to it.

The god's favorite irony.

There is a man in the water—sinking towards the coral.

A *human* man.

He's decorated in clothing that does not belong to the sea, the kind that is layered and dull and almost disappearing in the darkness of the water. A column of bubbles joins him to the sky he used to be a part of—his hands outstretched as if pleading with his gods to save him.

But his gods have no domain under the surface of the sea.

Satetey watches him from his distance—the jolt of his chest, the steadily dissipating column of bubbles.

He moves like a rip current—fast and fearsome and deadly—stopping inches from the man. His eyes are open, barely seeing in the darkness of the ocean and yet still pleading Satetey with what little energy he has left.

Satetey touches reverently, clawed hands curling around the man's face and brushing the hair back from his eyes—his mouth is open, a wordless cry falling through his lips.

"*He's pretty*." Satetey's voice is more song than words and despite his light touch his thumb cuts through the softness of the man's cheek. He pulls him closer, wincing at the coldness of his skin and the weight of his limbs.

The man's chest has stopped moving—Satetey shifts his hand from the man's cheek to his jaw, drawing his face closer to his, pressing a kiss to the space where his jaw joins his neck. A ripple of warmth passes through the water, gold twisting a place into the man's skin—carving a design into the skin at the behest of Satetey.

"*Pretty things deserve a second chance.*"

Satetey pulls him deeper into the water, tail whipping up a column of bubbles behind him as he moves.

The storm above the water cannot touch them and still Satetey curls himself around the man as if it were a danger—a hand around his waist and another around his shoulders. He buries his fingers in the man's hair—blood trails free from an injury not belonging to Satetey's claws.

Despite the extra weight, Satetey moves with an ease that is attributed to his tail—twisting and turning through the undertow like it were a pathway made for his existence.

He breaks through the surface of the water with a sharp turn, arcing through the air and pulling the body of the man beside him. The moment of air is not enough to rouse him—Satetey rolls onto his back, holding the man across his chest with both their faces bared to the sky.

The storm is miles from them now—some black cloud of rain and thunder that threatens harm but does little with the distance between them. Satetey shifts his hold on the man, pulling him closer so that his lips brush the shell of his ear—

"*Breathe*." The song that leaves his lips is a plea, begging for some sort of breath to enter his lips.

Satetey cannot explain his attachment to the man—and still he will not let him go. He pushes through the water, remaining on his back despite the strain that it causes to his tail. Satetey drops his left hand, allowing it to move under the water in an effort to find the sandbank—it tears the soft skin between his fingertips, but the warning is enough that he can stop before his back bears the brunt of it.

He pushes the man onto the shore as far as he can before tugging himself after—arms sinking into the soft sand with the effort that it takes to pull himself free from the water that owns him.

The sun has begun it's descent—enough so that the man before him is lit in a golden halo of light.

Satetey brushes his hair from his face, clawed hands delicate in an attempt to avoid injuring his face again. He lifts himself up on one arm, gazing down at the man as if he could *will* him to wake up.

"Breathe."

He borrows the voices of the world above—pressing a hand into the man's chest in an effort to dispel the water from his lungs.

It works—and the man's eyes flutter, *once*, *twice*—

Then they open.

The man gazes unblinking at the sky, Satetey pushes himself further—interrupting his view with a soft look.

Silver eyes meet brown.

The man breathes—a deafeningly loud sound, more of a gasp than a simple breath.

Arroyo was dead—water filled his lungs, the ocean pulled him in.

He was lost to a watery grave.

Until he *wasn't*.

His lungs crackle and groan as he breathes—protesting what should come naturally. He twists on the sand underneath him, coughing up burning salt water.

It is not the first time he has fallen into the sea, but it is the first time it did not let him go.

A body rests on top of him—warm and solid and *alive* and Arroyo reaches for them—

His hands find scales and seawater and he *knows* who has saved him even if his mind will not agree.

Arroyo opens his eyes to the setting sun—wincing at how brightly it shines, a face blocks the sun from blinding him further. His eyes meet silver ones, like pools of water under the light of the moon.

Satatey. The being's name is offered and understood, despite the difficulty of the shape—some *other* sort of blessing made it just so.

Arroyo breathes in response—gazing unblinking at the beauty of the man before him.

His hair falls in twists around them, creating a curtain between them and the rest of the world—as if Satatey wanted it to just be *them*. His skin is painted in blue scales, iridescent and impossibly beautiful.

As if the being could hear Arroyo's thoughts—he lifts a clawed hand to brush it across Arroyo's cheek, the human leans into it, finding comfort in something so sharp.

A clawed hand brushes along his cheek and Arroyo leans into it, finding comfort in something so sharp.

Arroyo had not thought it possible for him to fall in love.

He had seen the stories well enough, the notes written in the margins of Scripture, the words shaped by his mother as she spun tales of his missing father—

All of the stories, and he never thought it possible for *him*.

But the look that he offered to the man that saved him, to *Satatey*, it could only ever be called love.

There are legends passed from ship to ship—of the pirate captain and his sea witch.

Of the two men—one of the ocean and one of the land—who move their ways across the sea as if it were their domain, forsaking the gods of either in favor of the worship of each other. They have a penchant for strays, plucking the least of those from the sea foam and carrying them to wherever they should want to be.

It is said that if the pirate captain should appear on your deck—clad in a coat and tricorn and decorated with golden tattoos—on the calmest of days, you are doomed to sink.

But if he should appear when the skies rage their wars and rain pours—you will be spared.

The sea witch is always nearby, twisting shapes with his hands for the benefit of his captain.

Should you ever meet them—

Tell them the story of your love.

The beauty of the land—

Of your enjoyment of life.

And never tell them a lie.

To lie to a god and his lover—

Damned be the thought.

HEAVEN AND HELL WERE WORDS TO ME

HistorianRoo

Work Song

BASIL WILLIAMS ACTUALLY *LIKES* HIS JOB.

He can also recognize that he is the odd one out in the idea of *liking* to work—but he enjoys the practice of it far too much. The long days are full of lecture halls, too-bright lighting, far too many papers to grade and the specific fact that he was attempting to avoid anything that even resembled a social life.

An endeavor that he shared with his husband, who *also* lacked a social life.

Unless of course the fact that Jae was in the middle of some unknown location—almost surely dodging bullets, *probably* dismantling IED's, and fighting for his every breath counted as a social life.

It didn't—so Basil's attempt at *avoiding* a social life matched his husband's lack of it in his mind.

So—papers and tests and dissertation supervision were his "social life."

And whenever he could, he spent time with his husband in the form of bi-monthly video calls with sub-par service, phone calls when the location needed to remain confidential, letters sent (from Jae) and rarely replied (from Basil, the lack of a return address is *always* an issue) and the *rare* text from unknown numbers always signed with a codeword that confirmed who it was from (*Sturm und Drang)*.

And all of that time is bookended with research and students and nosy coworkers and *work*—

So, Basil Williams *likes* his job, because it fills the empty space.

Which is why it makes sense that *that* is where he was when everything fell apart.

"Is music inherently political?"

Of course a question as large as this has to come at the beginning of their time—when Basil has already announced the pop quiz and begun to write out the question on the board. Neels' question stops him in his tracks—the dry erase marker he is holding *screeches* against the board in time with his actions.

He knows exactly what their hope is—despite their thinly veiled attempt at being clever, Basil is not as naive as some of his students may believe him to be.

Basil has two choices: continue writing on the board like he never heard the question and have the students debate the idea of the definition of music, or, submit to the whims of his students and spend the entire lecture debating a question that is near impossible to answer in a simple way.

He chooses the second—

"It depends on your definition of *political*, Neels." He knows who it is without having to turn—almost surely a planted distraction by their classmates.

Basil turns, capping his marker and tossing it onto the desk in front of him—it rolls off the front and falls to the floor. No one moves to pick it up.

Neels looks sufficiently pleased, they lean forward, "Political, adjective, *relating to government or public affairs of a country*."

It's not an answer.

"Anyone else have a comment?" Basil moves around the desk, casually scuffing the toe of his shoes against the ground as he moves—the sound seems to echo in the silence of the lecture hall.

He *knows* that there are more opinions in the room—he can see them forming on his students' faces, it's just a matter of finding the

right words. Basil sits on the desk behind him, crossing his feet at his ankles and *waits*.

"Well—" It's a voice at the back of the room that speaks next, "If a musician composes something with political influence, then it has to be political."

It's a bit obvious, but he'll take it.

"Like Green Day, or Stevie Nicks." Basil offers the two musicians easily and the student nods. "But what about musicians whose music *becomes* politicized? Anyone have an example of that?"

Understandably, the room descends into silence.

"Beethoven, conducted by Kurt Furtwängler, during World War Two." This time, it's someone from the middle of the room. Basil tilts his head back, squinting in an attempt to see past the bright lighting—the suggestion belongs to David, a performance student.

"*Exactly*." Basil's memory of the video is clear—he can *picture* the black and white video, the stance, the *salute*—"For those of you who don't know. Kurt Furtwängler was a conductor in Germany during World War Two who conducted for Adolf Hitler. I believe David is referring specifically to the surviving footage of Furtwängler conducting Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—under the banner of Nazi flags."

A few members of the class glance at David for confirmation—he ducks his head as he nods.

"Beethoven's Fifth is *not* inherently political, with it's fate motif and the idea of moving from struggle to victory," Basil may not have a focus in the classical period, but he certainly knows enough about the ideas of a fate motif through the eras, "But this particular performance, with one of the *most* horrible men in history in attendance—Beethoven's Fifth *becomes* political. Its association is marred by this negative setting."

"But it's just noise."

Basil grins at the thought, lifting his hand and gesturing to the student who said it in a *tada* sort of manner, "It's *just* noise." He

waves his hand through the air in an effort to look dismissive—"It's just noise, so *why* are we here?"

No one can answer the question, Basil crosses his arms across his chest and lets them stew for just a moment longer.

"If music is just *noise,* then what's the point?" He pauses and looks back at David, "Not to pick on you in particular David, you've just made a great point by accident." Basil offers an apologetic look which is accepted with a shrug of David's shoulders and punctuated by him leaning forward in an effort to look engaging.

"The *point* is that music is a universal constant." This *particular* idea has been the pillar on which Basil built most of his academic career on, "And therefore it's going to interact with all nature of things—we have music in stores, news channels, the background of films—*and* we have political music."

Basil hesitates, eyes scanning the room as if waiting for a student to jump in and stop him, "Nothing is created in a vacuum, and when you're no longer around to defend the use of your music—like Beethoven, who *knows* what he would say about that particular performance—or if your existence is inherently political, then every action will have a political meaning to it."

"What do you mean?" It's Neels again—they've shifted, forgoing taking notes in an effort to pay attention. The entire room seems to lean in for a better listen.

"Well," Basil pauses, the words feel misplaced. It's an idea that Jae and he love to get in spirited conversations about and the thought of Jae stings *just* a bit. "Well, my husband and I just *existing* is a political action. Two gay men, Jae's parents are from Korea, he's in the army. It's—well, we're political. It's as if our identities are a part of *every* political conversation, so our actions are going to have this political edge to it, even if it's as simple as going to dinner or the movies."

It's not the first time he's talked about Jae, but in usual fashion the room seems to lighten—it's a reminder to his students that he's human, that he's got a life outside of the lecture hall.

"And—"

The doors at the back of the room *creak* open, echoing through the hall.

Basil waits a moment, squinting as if he could see the intruder any better—when no one speaks, he continues.

"It's a bit like *that*. When you are a part of a marginalized group, every action can be understood as political, whether or not that is the intention." Basil shifts on his feet, an uncomfortable feeling settles in his stomach—"So, to the original question, '*is music inherently political*' I think your answer is a sort of *yes* and *no*. A Schrödinger's cat approach to it, if you will."

The comparison gets a bit of a chuckle from the room and Basil smiles at the sound.

"Right—" He stands fully, crossing behind the desk and taking up the eraser for the board, he wipes the question away as he asks his next one, "Tell me *your* favorite music, I'm sure we've got some lyrical politicians as favorites somewhere."

He forgets the pop quiz in favor of conversation and when he turns around again it's to *most* of the room with their hands raised. Basil gestures to the student on the front row, Beatrice—the composer.

"Tchaikovsky."

Basil laughs, "Well, if you asked *him* he'd say no, but as a homosexual in Russia—he was politicized posthumously by the Soviet Union—by nature of *not* discussing that specific detail of his life."

The next student who speaks is Kwame, from the middle of the group, "Hozier."

Again, Basil smiles, "He's always been full of political references, though some may be more subtle than others. 'Nina Cried Power' or 'Swan Upon Leda'—he performs with this level of political understanding and does not shy away from using his platform to bring awareness." Basil hesitates, "If you want to see something really fantastic, look at live performances of 'Nina Cried Power.' He fills the screens around the stage with images calling for change, or highlighting how poorly people have been treated."

Footsteps sound, interrupting Basil's train of thought—again he squints, leaning forward to find the approaching figure.

He sees the shine of something metallic.

"I'm sorry, can I help you?" The question falls from his lips without forethought, Basil steps towards the desk, reaching for the light switch on the panel—the lights come up—

The two men—the two *soldiers* stop their approach, awkwardly glancing at each other as if they hadn't expected to be caught.

The pit in Basil's stomach grows—

"This is a closed lecture, students only." His voice is far less confident then moments before, his mind chants *they have the wrong room, they have the wrong room, they have—*

"Basil Williams?"

They have the *right* room.

Basil nods, leaning against the desk as if that would keep him from crumbling. He swallows through the bile that threatens to make an appearance.

"We need you to speak with you." It's not a question, the higher ranking soldier takes another step forward, motioning to the side as if that would encourage Basil to move.

"He's dead." The words slip out of Basil's mouth, his hands shake, his knees buckle—

Everything is forgotten as Basil watches for a reply to form.

"Perhaps we should speak privately."

Neels stands to take control of the situation—"Everyone out." They nearly shout it and the students forgo collecting their belongings in favor of complying. Basil should say *something* but his eyes are glued to the two soldiers.

The room empties—the door *slams* shut behind the last student.

The soldiers continue forward, stopping on the other side of the desk—for just a moment Basil convinces himself it's *nothing*—and then they start to talk.

The specifics are lost on Basil—he can see their mouths moving, the introductions that are offered, the *how*—but all he can hear is his blood rushing past his ears.

Then the man says the word *hospital*—

And all the sound rushes back to Basil.

"He's *not dead*?"

Hope feels like betrayal, and still Basil *hopes*.

The soldiers glance at each other, a thinly hidden look of surprise. The younger steps forward, "Let's take a seat Mr. Williams, it's—"

"No." Basil takes a stumbling step towards them, his legs hit the desk, "Is my husband dead?"

The hesitation speaks volumes.

"No sir." The younger one again.

The response brings confusion, Basil's knees buckle and it's only by the grace of the desk in front of him that he doesn't fall flat out on the floor. He puts his weight onto his hands and lets his eyes fall to stare down at where they meet the desk.

"Let's try this again, sir." The older one starts, "I'm Corporal Jameson, this is Sargent Smyth. We are here to inform you of your husband's injury—due to the nature of the mission it was imperative that we come to you in person. We attempted to come to your house yesterday and the day before but were unsuccessful—"

"Where is he?" The question is spoken towards the desk, a roughness in Basil's voice as if he had been shouting for hours. A tear rolled down his nose and fell soundlessly to the table, he didn't even realize he was crying.

"Langley. We can take you to him?"

It's phrased as a question as if Basil would ever say no—he straightens, grabbing his coat from the chair beside him and his bag from the ground beside the desk.

"Take me to my husband."

They move as if he's given them an order—Basil follows with determination in his steps.

His thoughts are a derailed train, tearing through his terrified mind—*I'm coming Jae—don't you dare leave me*.

Jae is composed of wires and machinery when Basil arrives.

A symphony of sounds echo in the room—a faint beeping in time with his heart, the *hiss* of air through his nasal cannula—

It's the most beautiful composition that Basil has ever heard.

A composition of Jae's continued existence and impossibly *life-demanding*.

Basil touches his hand reverently—as if he couldn't quite believe that he was there.

Corporal Jameson speaks, breaking up the composition with soft words, "While mission specifics cannot be shared, we can say that your husband was *brave*." It's spoken with more passion than it should have, Basil turns to the man and finds his eyes misty.

"You served with him." It's an observation, one that Jameson confirms with a simple nod.

"The doctors are better equipped to explain your husband's injuries, but I can share that he will be alright."

It's hope—impossibly loud and almost holy in its existence.

The soldiers leave, silent as a moment of rest.

Basil is left to the symphony of moments before him—Jae shifts on the bed, groaning in *subito piano*. He moves closer to his husband, sitting on the edge of the bed in the small space available there—

"Jae, my love." Basil's words are as soft as a lilting violin, they brush over Jae's ears loud enough to be heard.

He moves again, his face scrunching at the nose in a way that Basil has always adored. Jae's eyes open—

"*Sunshine*." The word of endearment falls through Jae's lips as if it were a surprise—*fortissimo* in the quiet of his composition. It is so impossibly *him* of Jae for the endearment to come before Basil's name.

"I'm here." Basil smiles, tears filling his eyes as he takes in the sight of his husband's smiling—if a little dazed—face. "And so are you, in spite of what happened."

There is no bitterness in Basil's voice, heartbreak yes, but no bitterness—in the same way that Basil loves his work—Jae loves his.

"No grave could hold me down—not when I have you to call home." The poetry is offered softly, lyrical in its own right. Jae shifts again, and the groan builds low in his chest, "Though this one certainly tried its best." It's teasing, taunting—

"I love you." Basil offers it without warning.

"I love you." Jae never says *too* at the end of it—Jae's love is never an afterthought, it's an *I love you*, offered wholeheartedly and warmly.

Basil tightens his hold around Jae's hand—

The symphony continues.

Nonbinary
Catboy

DON'T YOU HEAR ME HOWLING

JUNEBUGSCADENCE

It Will Come Back

I AM SOMETHING YOU SHOULDN'T LOOK AT *STARE TOO LONG* | *i'll burn your eyes* a being you shouldn't say anything to *hand me a word* | *i'll shape it's echo* regardless, you draw me in *as all things are* | *to the mouth of the abyss* you know better, have been raised better. even still, you shun it all. or

you simply do not care
maybe—morality and morals do not apply to me
maybe—i am something other, different from all the rest
something primal, instinctive
something deep rooted, cradled in the wounds
of every dead animal you have ever seen
a shadow that will always be behind you
a flow in your veins that will be there until
your dying breath

you—a creature of the inside, the hearth and the grain. and i?
i live and sleep in the earth, the ground below my bed
the sky above my blanket
the simplicity of:

watching the sunrise, how glorious flames fall from the sky,
the way the swollen-sallow-cool grows over the air

the eagles flying to nests far up, in mountain mist,
perches overlooking the forests,
the streams gurgling down below

the trees rustling and bushes swaying,
the dirt soft with dew, sticky to the touch,
petrichor hugging the earth again

a whole wide world waking up, easy from a night's rest,
a peacefulness that grasps the hand,

in caring, in sacred closeness

but this is only how i dream
this is not what i know
because what i know
instinctively | *wholly* | *effortlessly*
is

the way the bird never leaves the nest, until it falls
the way that living and dying, can never be separated
the way love is the sun that warms, hate is the sun that scorches
the way you let me in, but:
you don't intend to keep me
yes—you are kind to me
you feed me love *sweet* | *saccharine* | *sugarly love*
yet come tomorrow morning, you expect me to leave

and i will not—i will stay at your front porch, a dog chained to
a leash, the prongs of an invisible collar drawing blood
around my neck *christ* | *chained to a cross* suffering gladly for the
lives of others. a canine martyr *shot* | *bang* | *dead* by their owner
their lover
their all

you want to offer me a hand *a soul*, i do not know what to do
with it, it is foreign to me—a land i have never set eyes on,
a softness i have never learnt to touch
do i bite it or lick it? because i am not a peacefulness
that grasps the hand in caring—in sacred closeness, but:
a fire that burns
chars anything it can reach
destroys everything that it loves

i will flicker-flare atop your epidermis, a caustic agent that clings
closely *too closely* addicted, i will not let go, until there is nothing
left. even then, i will linger—always
because you smile at me
you hold me *gently* | *easily* a hug that is suffocating
you cover *silently* | *softly* control mistaken for care

always you are who you are *always* until suddenly, you are not—you are someone else altogether *yet | not at all* different. i once heard it said that you only exist when your name is called. but what if you have no name? do you never, ever, even exist?

when i am by myself, when i am alone, i am myself, i know who i am
i am me *easily | fully* i am always who i am, until suddenly you are here.
and i'm not quite me anymore, i'm someone *some-thing* else
i transform when i see you. it's clear:
in the cruel upturn of your lip
in the way that you pretend it is a smile
how there is so much difference *and still* so much similarity
between baring one's teeth and smiling. how easily my soul splits,
the weight of who i was reshaping in the darkness
there's no soft transition, no grace in the change
just a violent yearning, an aching hunger that i cannot escape

on your front porch, i wait for more, torn to pieces
still—i crawl back to you because the last thing you did was:

reset the bones you broke
bandaged the soul-splinters within me
your touch *a balm and a brand*
your hands *the only ones to put me back together*
always the ones *that will rip me apart*

in the dark, your silence is a call, the emptiness a reminder.
i beg to be let back in—to your life
your body
your all
every little bit *even in quiet little ways*
subtly and eagerly
silently and powerfully
beautifully | dangerously | deadly

in the end, tethered to your shadow like a curse,
i will always find my way back to you *always you*
because once—a warmth was lit and even when it ends, it burns

even when the cold numbs my skin
even when the winter settles over my weary bones

even when the darkness seeps in?
i will still search for you

so:

you want to give me mercy?
mercy will mean starving me
you want to show me kindness?
kindness will mean setting me free,
leaving me to face the inevitable,
the hunger, the biting cold

and if you show me something more?
if you feed me, fill me, leave me out to thaw?
it will never be enough
look—
the more i am fed
the more i will consume
the more i will need, always, howling
begging
frothing at the teeth
a wolf starved bare to its bones. give it a scrap *it will hold tight | never let you go* it will follow you through the bitter coldness of winter, through the sweltering heat of summer right outside your door, keeping the front steps warm, and yearning for a piece of kindness to sink its cuspids straight into

every night, from now and forever

no beginning

no end

i will howl

and howl

and howl

at your shut door

BREAKING IF I TRY TO CONVEY IT, THE BROKEN LOVE I MAKE TO HER

HistorianRoo

Foreigner's God

PERSEPHONE WAS LATE BUT THAT WAS COMMONPLACE. A known fact–

The Earth revolves around the sun and the moon revolves around the Earth.

Zeus had far too many alimonies–which was most of the reason why he had already moved on (though he would never admit to it).

Hermes regretted his choice in careers (as he did every century).

And Persephone was always late, despite the fact that their meeting happened every century, on the same day, the same hour, and the same place.

The world around them had changed but their meeting remained the same.

This time the location was a cafe ironically named *Demeter's* and to make matters worse it was full of fake plants. If Hades had foresight like the fates, he might have thought to change their setting, or at least donate some real plants.

He hopes that the orchid sitting in the pot in front of him isn't insulted, though he won't know for sure until she arrives.

Hades sips from his mug, smiling at the too sweet taste and willing the other cup of black coffee to stay warm despite the fact that it's sat there for over twenty minutes. He traces his fingertip across the wood grain–the smell of freshly ground coffee beans had permeated the wood, sinking into the soft untreated pine of the table.

"Henry?" It's the name he's chosen this century spoken in *her* voice and it sounds rather strange.

He stands, the action far too eager and smiles–

She's dressed to the nines in flowers and vines, a beacon of life in the ironically lifeless *Demeter's* coffee shop. Her hair is in braids down her back, the pink makeup she's chosen to paint around her eyes stands bright against her dark skin. Persephone smiles, a tense sort of thing that barely meets her eyes—she seems to look right through him, eyes sharp and steady and seeing far more than what is possible.

"Penelope."

Her name is as beautiful as she is—the world seems to stop with her in the room.

"It's good to see you darling." Her voice is warm, affectionate—she steps closer, reaching for him cautiously as if he would deny her a thing.

He pulls her to him, wrapping her in his arms, "*Persephone*." Hades whispers her true name, knowing instantly the comfort it brings. She holds onto him—hands far too cold against his back, nose like ice against his neck.

"Hades," Her voice brushes like a warm wind through him, bringing comfort and understanding in a single word.

When she pulls away it's with a strained smile.

Hades hesitates at the look, voice caught in his throat when he finds the lost look in her eyes, "H-here." He stumbles over the word, motioning to the open seat, "I got your usual." She steps away, settling into the seat with far too much grace. Hades follows suit, wrapping his hand around his mug.

Persephone sips from the mug and her face flushes from the warmth that rises over the rim. She sets it down, tracing her long acrylic nails across the rim of the mug.

"Hera went a few weeks ago." Persephone offers it softly and mostly towards the table.

Hades nods even though she isn't looking at him, "I was there." She knows he was and still he feels obligated to continue, "And Poseidon, after that oil spill." So many had moved on, all helped

by Hades. It was his lot in this life, his task after centuries of being *death* he is now the go-between.

She shakes her head as if in disbelief, clenching her fist where it rests on the table, "I don't understand it."

"That's why we are here." It's a platitude, unhelpful and sure.

It rings between them, taking up space and demanding attention.

But not yet.

They sit there, sipping coffees and basking in the glow of each other.

"I—" He hesitates, "I borrowed the orchid from the botanical garden."

The choice of wording makes her grin, "Borrowed?" She doesn't believe him, "Implying you'll return it."

"I might have," He sips his latte, knowing he never would.

Persephone looks at it with scrutiny, eyes tracing the shape of each petal—she reaches a shaking hand to touch it and the plant sways to reach her first. Affection shines in her eyes, lips moving soundlessly as she speaks in a language only the orchid may hear.

The world may have changed, the people may no longer believe in them—

But the plants know their keeper, their protector.

Persephone smiles as bright as the sun.

"They like it better in the pot than they ever did in the garden," She drops her hand to the pot, dipping her fingers into the soil for a moment.

Hades thinks she'll pull the pot closer to her, continue whispering to the leaves—but she doesn't. She just *looks* and there is something odd about it, his certainty in how the conversation was going to go wavers.

"There were sixty-four *thousand* wildfires last year." Persephone offers it like she is commenting on the weather.

It's time to have the conversation, so says Persephone.

Hades hums, "There were over six thousand voluntary kidney donations." He pauses, "Perfect strangers signing up to help each other.

Persephone's nail clicks on the table.

"There is a genocide taking place in the Gaza Strip." Tears fill Persephone's green eyes—they turn murky in her grief.

Hades knows she is seeing the destruction in her mind and that there are no words that he could offer that would comfort her. He reaches a hand across the expanse between them, "I know." He has felt the sorrow and the fear and provided what comfort he can. "Ares moved on because of it—war without honor has no meaning to him."

Persephone's hand is cold under his, her face twists to one of shock, "He's gone too?"

War and Nature have always been at odds—Persephone and Ares were never particularly close despite the shared ancestry. They may have lived without animosity, but that did not mean that they truly knew each other.

"He stayed for a while, thinking he could be a harbinger of peace in spite of the Greeks original definition of his nature—" Hades frowns as he speaks, the words feel hollow despite his closeness to the man. Hades held the god of war's hand as he went—whispering funeral rites as old as time over him.

Persephone is lost—Hades can see it in the way her eyes soften around the edges.

"There was a boy with a very rare blood type at a hospital in New York." Hades speaks softly in an effort to pull Persephone from the labyrinth of her mind without it being too jarring. "His blood type was impossible to match, but a man in Los Angeles with the same type heard that he needed the help and drove the distance to donate. Strangers funded the trip—paying for his gas and hotel and food, anything that he could need."

She hums—and despite the lackluster reply Hades can *see* the effect it has.

"There are stories that I could tell you of all of the good in the world. The everyday person stepping in to help an unknown." Hades smiles, clasping her hand tighter for just a moment, "The organ

donations, the firefighters, the man who jumped onto the Subway tracks just this morning to save a woman he didn't know—"

There is a far too vulnerable look in Persephone's eyes—Hades hesitates, if only for a moment.

"The world is trying to be good and it may fall short, but it's not on *you* alone to make it perfect."

"If—"Her voice cracks, the solitary word hangs heavy between them.

Somehow, Hades *knows* what she is going to ask.

"You can move on." The god of death offers a strained smile as he speaks, "If it's time, then it's time."

It's the first time in all the centuries that he has said those words to the woman across from him and immediately he knows that it is not the first time she has considered it. The flowers on her dress fade in color in time with her thoughts—it's just enough for Hades' attention to be drawn to it.

She pulls her hand out from under his, drawing it to her chest. Her eyes fall to the table, a single tear rolls down her cheek.

"I'm the last."

It's not a question and still Hades finds it within himself to answer, "Yes." It is a half-truth, she is the last that *can* go.

Persephone nods—a jolting action—and swallows audibly, wrapping her hands around her mug as if she could draw strength from the warmth found there. She lifts it to her mouth but doesn't sip from it—

"If I go—then you'll come too?"

Hades' lot in this immortal life is to watch everyone else fade—and to never be allowed the chance himself.

He should lie to her, spin a tale as strong as the fates threads, but he can't.

"No."

She looks up at him with enough force in the action that coffee spills over the rim of the mug—she sets it on the table with far too much weight, "Why *not*?" It's loud enough that the patrons at *Demeter's* turn to glance at her.

Persephone sees this as a betrayal—he has had the same conversation with her every century. The conversation that offers every good natured thing in the world as a reason why the goddess of spring should move onward from this life—and all the while he has held the secret that he cannot follow her.

"You'll convince me to *go*—" There is anger in her words, the flowers on her dress twist angrily, raging in time with the words that spill from her lips, "And stay out of *spite*."

If Hades thought it would comfort her, he would say yes—he would lie to her, even if it meant that she would hate him

But truth has always been their way through life.

"No, not out of spite." Hades leans back, as if putting distance between the two of them would soften the blow of his words. "This is my lot in every lifetime."

The anger turns to confusion, then to fear.

"I won't go, not without you."

But he would never make her stay.

"I can't let you do that." Hades' voice has a barely hidden tremor to it.

And she knows that it is the truth.

Persephone reaches her hand across the table—a lifeline that Hades takes without hesitation, gripping her hand as if it could ground him to her.

She's crying again—tears roll in steady streams down her cheeks.

Persephone knows that this is goodbye.

And all Hades can do is offer a strained smile, tears prick at his eyes but he wouldn't dare let them fall.

Because this isn't about *him*—it's about *her*, and it's time for her to say goodbye.

"I think I'll miss you most of all." Her tone is teasing as she says it—she looks at the orchid he brought for her—it's a sweet gesture, an attempt at making him smile that is partially successful.

It feels foreign—this part of the conversation.

In all the years that he's had, in all the languages and settings and circumstances—a naive part of Hades believed that he would never have it with Persephone.

"You've done all you can for this world." He starts softly, setting a hand on the table to draw her attention to it.

Her eyes lock with his—green against gray, life and death.

In some ways, it feels fitting that she should be the last to go.

"It's time to rest, eternally and peacefully."

She nods, a faint tilt of her head as if the movement were completed without her knowledge.

"You can leave, Persephone, goddess of springtime, goddess of nature." He smiles, "You—"

Persephone interrupts, "Wife of Hades, Queen of the Underworld."

It's the oft-forgotten titles, ones that Hades gifted unto her centuries before the Greeks were even a thought within Europe. They are fitting in a way that he cannot explain—despite the knowledge that they exist in opposition to the role she was born to fill. Hades smiles at the mention of their shared connection.

"Persephone, Queen of the Underworld." He repeats the words as if they were a prayer, holy and beautiful.

In an instant—Hades sees a different version of her sitting across from him in the cafe aptly named *Demeter's*.

He sees the Queen she was and still is—her flower covered dress shifting to a bone covered corset for just an instant, the ribbons in her hair turning to fire and flowers. It was how she looked when she spent the winters in the Underworld, playing into the imagery that the setting allowed.

"Persephone, last of the Olympians."

It was painfully true.

"You can rest and know that the world is softening and trying its best." He hesitates, "The world loved you and loves you still—it is not your lot in life to stay and force the world to soften."

She smiles a sad sort of smile.

"It's time to go, Persephone."

He flips his hand over, offering it to her to take when she is ready too.

"It's time to go."

Persephone looks at his hand, then to his eyes and holds her attention there. She is waiting and he will not rush her—she should have all the time she needs.

Because this is Hades' lot in this life—to offer comfort as the gods of the old world say goodbye when they are ready to. This was the last goodbye he'd ever have to say and that made it all the more bittersweet—it certainly wasn't the most difficult goodbye, the memory of Hestia's sobs as she said she was done rings in Hades' mind as the worst.

He shuts his eyes, images of his sisters and brothers at the ends of their times pass through his mind—tears threaten to fall.

"I'll miss you." Persephone's voice is firm and unbending—and he looks at her, watching the shape of the words form on her lips, "You were love incarnate, no matter how your realm was misunderstood."

She reaches for his hand—fingertips hovering over his palm.

"I'll love you, even though I can't see you." Her voice cracks, tears fall freely down her cheeks.

Hades smiles in return, "And I'll love you, until the end of my days."

They both know that there will be no end to his life.

Persephone sets her hand in his and for just a moment he can take comfort from her touch—

And then she is gone.

And Hades is alone in the world.

He keeps his eyes trained on where she *was*, as if she would suddenly reappear and smile and offer him flowers in place of words. Hades reaches for the orchid, knowing full well that he could never part from it—not when it was the last thing she ever loved.

"You—" Hades jolts at the voice, missing the question entirely as he looks up and meets the eyes of the barista who took his order.

He must look confused and the young man repeats the question, "You get stood up?"

Hades' eyes drop to the seat across from him, "Yeah." It's the easiest answer and he swallows around the lump in his throat, "Yeah she's not coming."

The barista is apologetic, but Hades cannot find it in him to listen to his words. The man collects her coffee cup, wiping down the table and walking off without another word said.

Hades stands, dropping a couple of bills on the table in the form of an apology as he collects the orchid, holding the pot in a careful grip against his side. He turns away from the table, crossing to leave without looking back.

He steps out into the sun—

The last Olympian.

CHERRY WINE

Robin

Cherry Wine
Inspired by The Odyssey.

MORE SHIPS SAILED THROUGH THE STRAIT THAT SPRING THAN Darias had ever seen—if he twisted himself out the window just enough he could see their masts docked in the common ports.

The councilmen have been wanting to gather every day too, now that the snow has melted. More ships have meant more kings and princes, taking space and food and drink and people, more expenditure on the part of the King-of-kings. Adurnarseh puts it as eloquently as ever in that morning's council—

"My prince, we have nothing. There is hardly enough coin to keep the guardsmen from rioting."

Darias takes a breath and is saved from replying by Marzban's rumbling voice. "This is unacceptable! We must raise an army for Kalhula. Is the great King-of-kings empire to be overrun by the western barbarians because of your budgeting problems?"

Adurnarseh turns to him, rather than respond to the insult. Clearing his throat, Darias prays to Mirtha for something to come to him. "They will back off once my father returns. He has defeated them soundly many times, and drove them far into the hinterlands."

He has not convinced them.

Nauder smiles placidly at him, and says, "Of course, the young prince is correct. The great King-of-kings did defend the empire from a great many threats in the west. I only pray when he returns from the latest," and his milky eyes turn towards the window, towards the ships, "that he may have an empire to come back to."

"If perhaps," Marzban speaks up when it becomes clear that Darias could not respond, "the prince would commandeer the kings. They are each martially skilled and enough slave-regiments fit to fight between the lot of them."

They try this at least once every session—nearly every day for the last three months.

"I would not," Darias says, quietly, taking a deep breath to steady himself, "dare to sit on my father's throne and command his kings. They would not listen to anyone other than the King-of-kings and while my father may live, there will be *no* other."

"Are these the words of the prince, or of the Queen-of-queens?"

As he stands, Darias looks at them, and reminds himself that he cannot afford weakness. The rest of the men stand up with him, though some take longer to do so. "I care not for insults to my mother. Pay your respect to her as respect for the throne. It is not empty for a moment."

"And may it never be so," murmured the men in a rehearsed chorus. One of mother's innovations, ironically.

He needs to visit her soon.

The heavy chain of the Queen-of-queen's bedroom door is unlocked with the key around his neck—there is no such thing as unnecessary precaution in these times.

He finds her at the writing desk, revising policy drafts. She rises to greet him, smiling. "My son, I missed you terribly yesterday."

"I am sorry, mother," Darias says, kissing her hand and sitting down on the chaise.

Her eyes narrow at his lack of explanation, but she leaves it. "How was council?"

He shrugs. "News of rebels in the west. The council calls for a new king."

She shakes her head with a *tsk*. "Our king still lives. Traitorous rats, the lot of them."

"Mother," Darias glances at her. "I fear sometimes they will not hold out for much longer."

"Do you mean Marzban, or one of those dogs that shout at my window all day?"

He stands up, drags a hand over his face as he begins to pace.

She is referring, of course, to the kings vying for her hand and his father's supreme title. "Their respect for father is what keeps you alive, mother." *What keeps me alive*. "But it will not last forever. Already there are—"

"Your father will return soon, I know it."

"It's been twelve years, mother!" He breathes, fisting his hand inside the cloth of his sleeve. "Your brother returned within two years, may he be worthy of Paradise. Many other warriors besides. If father has not returned by now…"

He cannot say it.

Nineteen years old, a man in his own right, and he cannot speak the words.

His mother smiles at him again, and beckons him close. She pats his cheek with a tender softness that burns his cheeks with shame. "I know it is difficult for you, my heart. Have faith. He will return for us."

Darias takes his leave, more frustrated than when he first came.

The kings taunt him, as he nocks another arrow on his bow. He draws the string, hand pressed too close to his cheek, and lets it fl6. The arrow hits the dummy an inch to the left of the target, and he pointedly does not make a sound at the sting on his face.

They taunt him as he walks to retrieve it—as he wipes the sweat from his brow and the blood discreetly from his cheek.

"Surely you all must have better things to do than sit and watch me shoot," he tells them, affecting wit to hide his boiling anger. Their border provinces are falling and the kings tasked to protect them are standing in front of him, *laughing,* a five years old disease.

One of them—Iskandar—steps forward, as richly dressed and peacocked as the rest. "Certainly, boy, if your mother ever opened her bedroom door," he leers. They laugh. Darias burns.

'My father would strip you of your name and bury you alive for your words,' he thinks and does not say, an arrow creaking in his grip.

They have been getting bolder.

Darias turns around and draws his bow again and imagines he's shooting straight between Iskandar's ugly drooping eyes. He cannot touch these men. They, however, seem to have no qualms with touching *him*. "Did you know," another interrupts his release, standing too close. "I did not see your father use a bow once, in the Yaers."

"Yes," says another. "But I heard the prince could hardly lift a shamsir, much less the King-of-king's *Zomorrodnegār*. Is this true, prince?"

His blade is pulled an inch from the king's throat in a moment.

The last time he'd seen *Zomorrodnegār* was at his father's hip as he climbed onto the departing warship. He had always been in awe of the mythical iron, imbued with legend and blood. His own is a training sword—edges blunted and scratched.

They laugh.

He survives the encounter with his bones intact, which he tells himself to consider a victory. He's bleeding somewhat excessively and debates going to the physician, as he does every time this happens, before dismissing the idea once again—he's been in the pockets of one of the suitors for the last two years, though he cannot remember which one.

He thinks he must've hit his head.

He goes to the bathhouse instead, sure the men will be busy gloating over his pathetic defeat for quite some time still. The attendants leave when they see him, furtive looks sent his way he cannot stand to decipher.

Entering the warm water sets all his bruises alight again, the water around him turning murky. For a moment, Darias rests his head on the stone lip, sunk down to his shoulders, and closes his eyes.

Like this, he can pretend he is empty, and the world is dark as it was before the first flame.

He's woken by a hand stroking through his hair. He shocks upright, shoves away before the grip can turn tight and push him under. But the man does not reach out and try to grab him again, just hovers for a moment before dropping into the red water.

It is King Asfandiar, who has followed him. He appears to be alone now, though, thankfully.

"What are you doing," Darias demands. They usually leave him alone for a good while, after.

It is a reasonable question. Asfandiar does not answer it. "You look like a proper prince like this, you know," he says instead, "bathing in a pool of wine."

"You know it is not." Darias' mouth is dry. "Tell me what you were doing."

"Did you like it? I can do it again."

"I'm—I was just leaving. Excuse me." He steps out of the pool, still dripping red water, and is made horribly aware of the difference in the state of their dress. Asfandiar holds out a towel for him, and he—he takes it.

"Are you just going to stand there watching me?"

The man hums contemplatively, tapping his clean-shaven jaw as he looks at him. "Are you embarrassed? You should not be. You are incredibly pretty."

Darias, covered in bruises and blood, feels a far sight from pretty. He turns his face away, angry at being mocked. Asfandiar merely bends and presses his lips to the red stain on his cheekbone. "Allow me to show you?" he asks, hands slipping around his wrists and eyes like burning embers in the lowlight.

Darias can hardly find it in himself to speak. Everything hurts so much, he cannot help but…

He nods. Asfandiar smiles.

The morning is the same as they always are.

He wakes up when the sun breaks through the water and alights upon his eyes, reminds himself of his duties, and then opens them. He gets up and folds down the bedcovers, before walking to the washbasin he'd filled the night prior, pulling off his nightshirt as he goes. He washes his hands, and then his head and neck—water dripping as his gaze is caught by the harbor.

The door to his room opens silently, and brings in a gust of cold morning air that raises bumps on his exposed flesh. He whips around, only to be pinned to the spot by Asfandiar's roaming eyes.

He grins—cocky and sure—and says, "Why, don't stop on my account."

Darias's hands certainly do not shake as he reaches for the jar of oil next to the basin. "Who let you in here?" he asks, as he dips his fingers in, the jasmine aroma doing nothing to relax his tensed muscles.

"Does it really matter?" the man drawls, walking close enough that he can feel his heat. As Darias anoints his throat and collarbone with the perfume, the very tips of Asfandiar's fingers trace his spine, dragging up and down in slow motions. When he moves to his hair, lips join the hands.

"You are so tense," Asfandiar murmurs, the warm breath raising the hairs on the back of his neck. "Are you afraid?"

Darias does not say anything, stilling beneath the ministrations.

The man laughs and falls back, throwing himself on Darias's freshly made bed and gazing out the window. Darias turns, and looks at him, and is loath to think him handsome, to think him far more princely—as he reclines on his bed within the full light of the morning sun—than Darias has ever been astride his father's ceremony horse. Hair shining like gold, eyes that seem molten, beckoning him closer.

"You are ruining my bed," he says, like an idiot.

Asfandiar closes his eyes, smiling. "It is a funny thing, a prince who does the duties of a servant. Do your counselors know you spend your nights in the kitchens?"

It's no surprise, at least, how he knows it. The servants have been in the pockets of the suitors for almost ten years now—the same reason he prepares all of his and mother's meals himself, that he made sure no one in the palace had keys to either rooms. Evidently, he was not vigilant enough.

A deep-seated betrayal, that Darias is not even sure he's allowed. The kings and the counselors and the defences bleed the coffers dry. Their pay is next to nothing. Can he blame them?

He sits on the edge of the bed and Asfandiar pulls him closer. The man traces the red aches lining his shoulders. "Must you touch every bruise?" he asks. "Are you trying to make sure that they are real? I assure you they certainly feel so."

Asfandiar's handsome face creases at his poor attempt at humor. "You are mine, aren't you, Darias?"

I belong to a man most certainly dead, he thinks. "Of course I am," he lies.

"The others desire you. I have heard them speak of it. Would you give them what you have given me?"

He strokes Darias' hair, soft and sweet. Darias holds his breath, has to let it out to say, "Of course not."

It hurts, again, though not as much as the bruises. He likes it, more, anyways.

It is the new year's evening and the festivities draw late into the night. His mother made an appearance to the people on her balcony—usually locked—for the first time in a year. The whole city is high on it.

Asfandiar is high on something else too—all the kings are. Darias wonders idly, at the commotion in the courtyard, how they have not completely drunk their cellars dry yet. He wonders, when the man has found his way to his rooms, and is kissing his lips, if one can become intoxicated like this, too.

"You taste like cherries," he mumbles nonsensically, tracing the red stain on Asfandiar's mouth when he pulls away and pulls him to his bed.

"And you taste," he whispers, into the pain of the red-bitten hollow of his throat, "far sweeter."

He doesn't leave that night, and Darias watches his closed eyes carefully. He has not fallen asleep, he's learnt to tell, by the fingers trailing his back. But he is on the very cusp of it, so Darias feels safe in confiding, "I hardly remember him. My father." He has not even told his mother this. "Sometimes I think I know more about you than I do him."

"Do you really believe he is still alive?" Asfandiar answers.

"My mother does. She has faith in him."

Asfandiar laughs. "She keeps you a child."

He tries to change the subject. "I wish it could always be like this."

Asfandiar's hand slows, and Darias finds himself missing the soothing ache of his calluses over the freshly torn skin. "Mm, when I wed your mother, I will come to your rooms everyday and give you what you ask for."

His blood runs cold.

Asfandiar notices—he always notices everything. He sits up a little to look at him, an incredulous look on his face. "That *is* what I am doing here, surely you remember that?"

Darias turns his face away. Asfandiar turns it back. "Don't be jealous, boy. Even the Queen-of-queen's bed couldn't keep me away from the sight of your sweet cries."

Darias does not speak. He cannot fathom what to say. He can only think, in that moment, how much everything hurts.

"Surely," the man continues, "you did not think *you* would be crowned. This is truly the best option for you—any of the others would have you butchered as their first decree."

"Yes, King Asfandiar," he replies so the man would stop speaking.

He doesn't, because the man who hurts him loves him—and he loves him in return. "You are mine, aren't you, boy?" he asks, stroking a red cheek.

"As you are mine," he replies. Asfandiar nods, satisfied, and lies back down.

There is nothing, Darias is starting to realize, that is more painful than love.

And there are things far more important than it.

"What are these," his mother asks as he appears at his door, guileless innocence in those aged eyes. "They don't look like training wounds."

He walks, sits down on her settee, tired. "And what would you know of training wounds?"

She draws back, before her eyes narrow. He does not stop her, not this time, when she reaches out again and quick as a fox has the top of his tunic unbuttoned and open, secrets flayed and throbbing in the open air.

He closes his eyes and looks away.

"Lacerations and burn marks. Bruises, and, and—my son, have you seen the physician about these? They look…"

Darias pushes away her gentle fingertips from the violent stains. "Do not fuss, mama. You know the physician is not safe."

She collapses on the chair next to him and he takes her shaking frame into his arms. "Who has been hurting you, my darling?" she asks, but he shakes his head. "Tell me, it is my duty to protect you!"

'*You*,' he does not say. '*You have been hurting me.*'

"They are so I may protect *you*", he tries to soften. "The men are like ravenous dogs. I have kept them at bay, mama, for you".

She begins to cry. "Sweet child, you should have come to me, I could have, I—"

"You cannot do anything. Our hands are tied," he says, stung by her tears.

"When your father returns, he will set things right. Have hope, my son," she replies like always. He cannot stand it.

"You have ruined us, with your fruitless hope! I should have been made king a long time ago—"

"And been a child puppet at the hands of your father's men? I have *protected* us, protected this kingdom and our lives from this room, with a thousand men attempting to batter down the door. You dare to tell me that I have ruined us?"

You know, she suffers only for you.

He breathes, reminds himself to breathe. "Be that as it may, queen-mother, I am a boy no longer, and the empire needs a ruler. The kings will not be swayed any longer. Our borders are threatened. This throne is *my* birthright—"

"Your father—"

"My father is dead!"

The queen-mother stands up, so abruptly that her chair falls to the floor with a great crash. "Do not ever say that again. Your father will return for us."

I love that light in your eyes.

Darias shakes his head, tears rising to his eyes to match her wet cheeks. Strangely, he cannot taste their salt on his lips, as though made of pure water. There is no bitterness left in him. "He has not returned when we needed him. He has only ever been a legend to which I will never measure up. I could never be a man to you while living in his great shadow."

"My son," she tries, reaching out with a hand to his cheek but he turns away from it.

"Your son," he sobs without sound, "their coward of a prince, a useless title and even worse man."

You simple little thing. They call you their prince?

"No," she says vehemently. "You are a prince worthy of your name. You have never been less than a perfect son to me."

Darias shakes his head—he knows what she will say, and he cannot—

Don't you consider it a mercy that your father never returned? He has been spared the shame of you.

"Your father would be proud."

"It does not matter," he gasps, and it is wrong, he can't shout at her—and stands up. "I'm sorry for what I said, mother. You will have my loyalty till my dying breath. But I must protect us, now. Surely you see that I must?"

When it looks as though she might really answer, Darias takes his leave; he closes the door on his name and steels his gaze on the path ahead.

The councilmen shock awake when he walks into the meeting hall. They are unused to waking before the sun. Or perhaps, they are frightened at the sight of their prince clad in weapons of war.

The kings have gathered, as well, eyes bloodshot and boasting their sway with their presence. It's a good thing for him now.

"What is the meaning of this, boy?" calls Iskandar. Adurnarseh sends the king an uneasy look, but does not speak. All are silent.

There is no one else here for you.

Darias speaks. "Your boy," he looks at the suitors, and at the councilors, and the guards that line the hall. "is dead. He has bled out and buried himself. In his place and birthright has been born a King-of-kings. Swear your allegiance to me, like you swore to my father and his father before him, may they be worthy of Paradise."

Marzban steps forward, head bowed. "You are claiming the throne, my prince?"

"Your *King*. It is never empty for a moment."

"What presumption!" shouts a king. "Your father's funeral has not even been held yet."

You could never be more, better, than you are like this.

Darias draws an arrow and watches with the rest as it skewers the man's mouth. He draws another and their raucous falls still. They begin searching for their weapons, to find none. The guards do not shift at their calls. They are tired.

The palace is a hollowed shell of itself.

"The late King-of-kings' funeral will take place this evening. I ask for your allegiance now. Do you give it?"

Asfandiar steps forward. His clothes are rumpled. He walks to Darias, slowly as though he were a spooked animal. "What are you doing, my heart?" he asks, voice soft so the others may not hear, like Darias has been waiting to hear for what feels like his whole life.

You'd let me take everything, wouldn't you?

"Your heart is battered and bruised," he replies. "It is not worth saving." Darias looses the arrow and buries it in the suitor's stomach. He draws another before anyone can move and sinks it between those wide honeyed eyes.

His heart breaks. He does not spare a second glance to the bleeding corpse as it falls and pools at his feet. "Swear your allegiance," he repeats to the crowd, voice grated like an axe on stone, "or place your faith in Paradise. Choose!"

Marzban falls to his knees. The rest of the councilors follow. Some of the suitors attempt to escape, and are speared by the sentries. The rest offer their hands, grudging respect and rage set in the lines of their oaths.

"To the new King!" calls Adurnarseh. He is smiling. *Victorious*. There, a cacophony that stirs blood. Darias looks outside and his heartbeat thunders in his ears like drums.

"I'm going, to keep you safe," his father had said, and a seven-year-old Darias, bright-eyed and round-cheeked, had believed him, supplicant to his god.

The streets are filled with rejoicing people. "The king has returned!" they cry, "The king has returned!"

YOUR DRAGONS ARE GLOWING. v 2025

RUN
to my lover

KEEP MY HOPE YOU'LL FIND WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

HistorianRoo

In Your Own Sweet Time

THEY'VE BEEN SITTING AT THIS NICE RESTAURANT FOR A LITTLE over an hour when Amenum leans forward, pushing his half-full wine glass and empty plate to the side in favor of reaching across and taking Kaeso's hand in his own.

Kaeso knows what is coming before Amenum even opens his mouth and still he does not dare to hope.

"Have I ever told you the story of the first star I created?" Amenum cradles Kaeso's hands in his own, as if it is the most precious thing in the world.

Kaeso's reply is hesitation. He has heard of the elements of creation that Amenum has borne—the stars and seas and heavens and kindness—it is all pieces of the god that sits across from him. Shock sits strong in his stomach alongside the wine and cake—a weight tinged with worry.

Amenum has not told him a story since the incident with the portal to hell and the three men who tried to end the world—ever since *something* was shared between him and the one above the world that he won't speak about.

"Ishozrauh?" Kaeso watches Amenum's face, waiting for some sort of clue into what emotions spiral through the god's mind. No matter how much Kaeso insists he loves every aspect of the man—he's wearing dark glasses tonight, hiding the paleness of his unseeing eyes. "I believe you've mentioned it darling."

When Amenun shakes his head it's a stunted movement, his hands shake where they hold Kaeso's. The lesser god tilts his head, eyes falling to their joined hands before trailing back up to Amenum, "Dearest are you—"

"I remember the first star I ever made." Amenum's voice is barely above a whisper, nearly lost in the din of the restaurant, "It shone *so bright* that I thought it would catch His eye and so I snuffed it out. Crushed it between my palms and felt the fire burn the skin away."

It sounds painful—Kaeso winces in sympathy, remembering just how *hot* the fire of the world burns.

The thought of it harming a greater god is fear inducing—only the fallen can be harmed.

"I named her Dawn, centuries before there ever was one." Amenum smiles a soft sort of smile that holds far more pain then it should—it's haunted. "When she was gone, minutes after being created, I thought of the scars as Dawn too."

Kaeso holds very still as Amenum moves—the greater god opens his hands slowly—as if in his own time—baring his palms to the lesser god before him almost in supplication. Kaeso's eyes find the scars—like bursts of starlight, decorating his palms and he wonders how he has never noticed the blemish before now.

"I didn't think greater gods could get scars." Kaeso's reply is carefully placed in the air and accompanied by him willing the waiter to turn away just as he started to approach the table. Kaeso does not want the moment to break, not when Amenum is telling his stories.

The greater god shakes his head and closes his palms. "They can't." He pauses and attempts to pull his hands away from Kaeso—he allows him to pull one away, keeping the other wrapped protectively between warm palms. Amenum sips his wine. "I think that is the moment when I started to fall, after creating that star and snuffing it out."

Kaeso's question passes through his lips without his permission, "Why?" He holds back on retracting it and instead favors watching Amenum's face for the little expressions he is not so great at hiding.

It is shown clearly on his face—the fear and worry that he holds at every mention of his life before this, the way he ended up *here* on the earth. Amenum makes no attempt to control his expressions as he answers the question, "Because I fell for acting in opposition, for poking and prodding at the intentions for the world." There

is a faint *smile* on Amenum's lips—it does not match the tone of his words.

Kaeoso copies the smile, the action unsure.

"When I met you—at the beginning of everything—they had only just healed." Amenum's hand makes itself known as he brushes his fingertips over the inside of Kaeoso's wrist. "I think that when I was first burned, it was meant to be a warning—but then I continues and that's when—"

He doesn't finish.

Kaeso nods and leans forward, propping his head on his hand and waiting for his lover to continue with his stories.

"But that isn't the story I'll tell you about. Not now at least."

Some part of Kaeso feels disappointed that he won't finally know that tale—but the feeling is fleeting and he is back to looking at the greater god with admiration as he sips his wine.

"You have another question." Amenum states it, head tilted to the side and his trapped hand shifting in Kaeso's, his fingertips brush over smooth skin and palms—stimming, though he would never say as much.

"Do you regret it?" It's not a question he would have asked before the threat of the three, or even during their centuries long friendship—or shorter courtship. It is only now, with love on the table and a child at home that Kaeso feels confident enough to ask about the Before.

"No." The reply is fast and accompanied with a smile that looks far more genuine compared to the ones before. "I wouldn't have met you, or our darling Enoch, or any of those we now know."

Kaeso isn't so sure about that, but he won't question it, not when Amenum smiles so genuinely and openly.

"I have more." Amenum taps his hand on his wine glass, filling it with a small piece of magic—Kaeso's glass fills as well.

They sip their wine and the lesser god asks around the rim of his glass, "More of what, dove?"

Amenum sips, "More scars."

That surprises Kaeso more than he would admit. He leans forward in the same ways as before, giving Amenum the space to tell his stories when he is ready.

It takes him longer than the previous time to tell this story and when he starts, it is in the same voice as before—soft and almost unsure. The restaurant has quieted—but Kaeso cannot be sure if it was by his powers or by the greater god sitting across from him.

When he begins, it is accompanied by his hand pressing against the side of his glasses—not taking them off—but holding onto the arm of them as if bracing himself.

"When I was given my eyes, it was not a welcome gift, but I knew without them I'd be unable to appreciate the sky and stars I had created, so I allowed them to be bestowed upon me." Amenum pinches the arm of the glasses, but doesn't move them yet, "I did not know that they would be for aesthetics, rather than funcion."

When he pulls the glasses from his face, he sets them on the table and keeps his head lowered—eyes facing his lap more than the lesser god before him, as if working up the courage to look him in the eyes.

"I do adore your eyes, dear." Kaeso is being honest and his honesty is rewarded with a glance, a glimmer of the shadowy eyes that he loves.

"I've grown to love them by hearing the way you love me." It's an honest and sentimental reply that has Kaeso's heart clenching in his chest. "The last thing I saw was the way the dawn rose over *you* at the beginning of the world."

Kaeso tries not to react but can feel the sting of tears in his eyes.

Amenum continues, "You were in the middle of it all and I was about to fall to the beyond." There is a somber tone to him but Amenum moves on before the emotions can linger. "Your hair shone in the same way my star had and I knew I wanted to *know* you, because even though Dawn had scarred me centuries before, she brought me to you."

And then Amenum looks up and Kaeso sees the scars that he had mentioned moments before. They fan out around his eyes, little lightning bolts of white scarred skin that Kaeso had never noticed before because of his love of the gray colored eyes.

Kaeso reaches out—crossing the small expanse of space between the two of them and brushing a delicate touch around either eye. Amenum flinches—before relaxing into the touch and it is only after Kaeso lowers his hand does the greater god sniff and pout in his usual attempt at crying.

"Treasure." Kaeso waits for Amenum to turn his face to him again before continuing, "I'm very much in love with you." And his words are met with another sniffle and pout and Amenum clenching his hand in the center of the table.

Amenum smiles and the look stretches the scars that decorate the skin around his eyes, pulling them taunt and into his smile lines. When he speaks again, it is a little more confident.

"I think I loved you from the moment I saw you there—but I would have never admitted to it." He sips his wine. "You stood so proud—ever the prim and proper god."

And that is the difference—Amenum would never call Kaeso *lesser* despite that being his delineation.

"I almost didn't approach, out of fear you'd turn and run back to Her." He hesitates, "But then you turned and smiled and nothing else mattered. Not Dawn and her scars or the Before—it was just you and me at the beginning of all of this."

Amenum motions to the restaurant around them, to the cane resting under his seat—to his guide dog beside him.

"And so I think I loved you, from the last time I saw."

It's Kaeso's turn to smile and sniffle and wipe at tears till forming on the corners of his eyes.

"It was love at first sight—or maybe last—for me." Amenun's gaze does not waver, despite its unseeing nature. "And then every century passed and the love was made stronger, you learned how

to be human and I learned how to be loved—even if it wasn't a romantic kind of love first."

Amenum is fiddling with something under the table, enough that the dog shuffles and glances as if he needed to help.

"I know that—that you are beyond what I deserve, that we've been *us* for a lot longer than we ever belonged to either delineation." Amenum is sniffling again, cheeks pink and eyes shining in the candle-light. "I—"

He pauses, the words suddenly difficult.

Kaeso watches closely as the hand from under the table appears and sets something beside their joined hands.

"I love you—more than every thing I have ever made, more than every star in the sky crafted by these scarred hands."

And suddenly Kaeso realizes exactly what *this* is, and the tears begin anew on his cheeks.

"I want to spend eternity with you, here, and with Enoch and maybe another kid—"

"A boy." Kaeso smiles, tears on his cheeks, "We can call her Dawn."

Amenum nods and sniffs, "Eternity with you and Enoch and Dawn."

It's quiet for a moment.

Kaeso smiles, "You haven't asked yet, my heart."

"Will you, Kaeso, marry me—an old god?" It's accompanied with the brightest smile and hopeful eyes.

"Of course, of *course*—" His eyes are drawn to the ring in its box, a dark metal band embedded with grey and blue stones. "They—" Kaeso looks up at Amenum, eyes fresh with tears for all the best reasons, "They're our *eyes*."

And Amenum nods, a prideful look on his face as he pulls the ring from the box and slides it onto the proper finger.

"It's very *human* of us to have a ring." Kaeso says it with a smile, admiring the way his hand with its ring looks wrapped in Amenum's hand.

"It is."

They'll carve their own spot in this world.

A place just for them.

An old god, a lesser god, a boy named Enoch and a girl named Dawn.

Love incarnate, for the rest of eternity.

WE'RE ALL RIGHT

TESSA MILLETT

The Bones

DESPITE IT HAVING BEEN TWO MONTHS SINCE THE (RATHER dramatic) breakup, when Livvy found herself standing in front of Cole's apartment, she nearly had to use her inhaler. Her lungs were threatening to flare, not from any allergen, but from a panic attack building in her chest.

Don't be ridiculous, he said you could come get the records you forgot. He's not going to yell at you again. Her inner voice was far too smug for being the one hyperventilating.

Let's not forget that I started the yelling, she retorted to herself. *Besides, he said I could come over. It's not like I'm showing up unannounced.*

A few more breaths, and she finally felt in control of her body enough to knock on his door. There was a brief shout of "Coming!" before Cole was opening the door.

He gave Livvy a weak smile. "I told you, I got the doorbell fixed."

"Oh. Yeah." She looked at his face as best she could without feeling uneasy, and saw that it looked like he had finally been sleeping better, between the bags lightening under his eyes and the stubble that had been a constant factor being shaved.

He smiled (and was it her imagination or was he feeling shy?) and stepped aside so she could go in. The building was old but well-maintained, and the apartment within was clean, with what looked like new posters in the hallway. There had never been much furniture, except for the old couch that had been her grandmother's and was currently in storage. But she thought she saw a bean bag chair peeking around the corner.

Livvy looked around, feeling for what to say. She finally went with a subtle *Doctor Who* reference. "You've redecorated."

Cole scrunched his nose a little as he laughed. "I knew you'd comment on it. Yeah, after… after everything, I thought it was a little empty, and so I went out and got some posters. Got one of the Ninth Doctor, got an old Johnny Cash poster too at the thrift store. That was cool." As he mentioned each poster, he gestured to them on the walls. As he made it further down the hall, he said, 'Still haven't replaced the couch, but I got a new bean bag chair to use when I have a guest over."

She raised an eyebrow. "Have you been having people over?"

Another laugh, less nervous this time. "Not like that. And not at all yet." He looked sheepish, but finally sighed and added, "I think that girl at work you hated having over has designs on me, but I want to take time to work on myself first."A small shrug finally loosened some of the visible nerves.

Livvy laughed despite herself. "I told you she wanted us to break up!"

After laughing with her, Cole said, "That's actually the other reason I won't date her." Her shoulders relaxed a bit before waiting to hear the end of his statement. "She may have wanted to end our relationship, which makes her untrustworthy to me."

Livvy felt the knot in her gut that had been there since the breakup start to loosen. "You—that's really mature."

"Thanks." He paused for a long time, and Livvy caught herself staring at the poster of the Ninth Doctor in front of her. That had been one of the few things they agreed on about the show. Tennant was phenomenal, but Eccleston was the reason the show got a second chance. Before she fully realized she had lost focus, Cole said, "I blocked Terrence and Gabriel."

"You what?"

"I realized you were right."

Livvy's eyes started to water as she found something she never thought she would get from Cole: forgiveness and validation. He was still talking, though, so she quickly paid closer attention.

"The way that both of them reacted to our relationship problems was out of line, and I shouldn't have reacted the way I did. And I shouldn't have let them talk to you the way that they did." Another pause, this one shorter, and Cole said softly, "I'm sorry. I should have defended you."

Livvy took a moment to process how she felt (still hurt, but rapidly shifting from blaming Cole to understanding him) "You had valid concerns that they blew out of proportion. I blame them, not you." She realized for the first time how desperate he must have been to reach out to others for help with their relationship, and found that she was no longer angry with him.

"Even so, I should have known better. You weren't abusive like they said you were. You never were. You were just as hurt and confused as I was." He rubbed the back of his neck ruefully, and she could tell he expected a lecture. But at the same time, he wasn't taking back anything he had said. He clearly meant it.

After taking time to process everything, she said, "I appreciate you telling me this. I didn't expect that when you told me you found some of my stuff."

"Oh, I did find some of your stuff, I found your record collection—turns out it slipped behind the kitchen table."

"Always that damn kitchen table." She laughed again, before finally admitting, "I missed you a lot."

"I missed you too." He stuck an arm out for a hug, clearly willing to be rebuffed if it was too soon. Instead, he found himself getting tackled in a rib crushing hug, interrupted when Livvy remembered the (no longer needed) bargaining chip in her purse.

"I forgot! I found this in my stuff!" She pulled out a smallish box, opening it to reveal a resin snake with a real skeleton inside.

"Oh my God, you found Rhea!" Cole nearly grabbed the box in his excitement, before remembering himself. "I'm so glad you found her."

A flood of memories popped up. Going through the drive through at a burger joint with Rhea on his glasses, and the staff being excited to see a corn snake act friendly and loving. The way Cole

had cooed over the baby Rhea when they had first bought her, his determination to be a good snake parent.

Without hesitation, Livvy pushed the box into his hands.

"Take her. She belongs with you." When he tried to protest, she continued, "I have two of her last sheds. You deserve to have something of her."

Cole cradled the box, much the same way he'd cradled the snake while she'd been alive, before whispering, "Thank you, Liv."

He hadn't used her nickname from their early friendship much in the last few months of their relationship, let alone in the time since. Her eyes welled up, and she had to take a moment to compose herself. Across the hallway, Cole was wiping his eyes as well, muttering something about dust mites.

Finally, he composed himself enough to ask, "Do you want some coffee while you make sure I didn't miss any of the records?"

Fortunately, Livvy knew full well which records were hers and which were Cole's. It was fairly simple: anything modern (with the exception of modern folk), pop, or from a musical was hers, while anything folk, country, or instrumental was his. As she skimmed, she found her mental count was one off. As she checked more thoroughly, she found the culprit, a Brandi Carlile record that she had bought for Cole's birthday.

"Missed one of yours when you were sorting," she said, holding it up from her spot kneeling next to the box.

He was across the room, making coffee, and didn't even look up before saying, "I thought you might want it. It was your favorite."

The casual thoughtfulness of the gesture caught her off guard, and she said, "That's really sweet. Thank you, Cole."

Wanting to match his kind gesture, she began digging in earnest through the box, until she found his favorite of her albums, one by Ed Sheeran that they had danced to while the dog Marius had howled along.

"You keep this one."

Before he could refuse, she kept talking. "This way you can play it when I bring Marius over for a playdate."

Surprised, Cole said, "I thought you were keeping the dog at your new place, which…" he did some quick math on his fingers in a comedic manner, earning a laugh, "Visalia is like a half hour from here."

"I can justify visits now, since I'll be visiting you anyway."

"I—thank you." He wiped his eyes, hands shaking a little as he turned back around to grab the coffee and handed her a mug.

"I know how much that silly dog meant to you. I was planning on figuring out some sort of joint custody thing if we can work it out. I'm not a total monster, no matter what some of our former friends may think."

"I know you aren't. And for what it's worth, I am sorry for how I treated you."

"I am too." He drank a gulp of coffee, hiding his face behind the coffee mug as he often did when he was feeling overwhelmed. "I made a lot of mistakes in our relationship, and I wish I could change that."

"We both made mistakes," he said, shrugging. "But thank you for owning your half of it."

"Of course."

There was a comfortable silence, much better than the awkward one when she'd first arrived. Too soon, though, she realized that it was nearly the time she'd promised to leave. Curse of using a borrowed car.

"I need to get these to my new place," Livvy said regretfully, gulping the last bit of coffee and grabbing the box of records.

"Of course. Oh, if you find the copy of *Braiding Sweetgrass*-"

"Yeah?"

"Finish reading it before you bring it back."

With a grin, she turned back to face him. "I will."

Their friendship was different now, no questions asked. But she had no doubt, now that they had proven the strength of their commitment to each other, that they would always be friends. Things would never go back to the way they were before. Romance had become a thing of the past for them. But the bones were still good, and that's all that mattered.

JACKBOOT
JUMP
光復香港
LIBERATE HONG KONG
時代革命
OLUTION OF OUR TIMES
BLACK LIVES MATTER
STANDING ROCK AWAKENS THE WORLD
WOMENS RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS
TRANS PEOPLE BELONG
ACLU
CIVIL RIGHTS PLUS FULL EMPLOYMENT EQUALS FREEDOM
FREE PALESTINE
WE MARCH FOR JOBS NOW!
WE DEMAND EQUAL RIGHTS NOW!

POWER IS MY LOVE

TESSA MILLETT

Nina Cried Power

HE'D BEEN GONE FOR THREE DAYS. THREE AWFUL DAYS OF not knowing if her love Rafael was alive or dead, or if the protest had truly been as violent as the official documentation said. Then, abruptly, on the afternoon of day four, the phone rang.

Lydia answered without looking. "Hello?"

"Oh, thank God, babe. I was worried I got the number wrong."

She nearly dropped the phone. "Where are you? I've been so scared! Are you ok?"

Thankfully, Rafael let her ramble on until she lost her breath, then cut in, "I'm ok. I am at the county jail, they're debating whether or not to release me or to transfer me. This protest is getting really big, dear, and they know I helped organize it. I might not be home for a while. But I love you."

"I love you too," she said tearfully. "What happened?"

"Outside agitation. Someone picked a fight, and the rest of us took the fall."

After taking a deep breath, Lydia asked, "What do you need?"

"Huh?"

"You never call just to be sentimental," she said, hoping he understood that she didn't mind helping.

There was a short pause. "I did just want to hear your voice, but there is something you can do…" Rafael detailed a letter, meant to be taken to the protest and read, which he'd forgotten to bring the day of. "It's in the desk drawer with all my important papers. Take it to the other organizers, so they can see what to do with it."

"Of course, honey. You'll be ok."

"I know I will. I have you."

Not long after, he was forced to hang up, and Lydia got to work. No time for tears when people's freedom was in question.

The letter was quickly found, and she flipped it open, needing to hear her love's words, in case things turned out badly.

When we think of crying power, or declaring truth in such a way that we empower ourselves and others, we often think of grand gestures, world changing moments. The 'I have a dream,' moments. And while, yes, these are absolutely crying power, there are quieter moments.

There are moments where one person stands and says, 'no more,' when a group gathers in solidarity, when the first brick is thrown.

When the first heart is changed, power has been declared and is received.

These moments lead from one heart to a thousand, from the first brick, the first sit in, to Pride month, to the March on Washington. People are crying power all around you. Just look, you'll see. Let's examine a few cases…

A woman—a history teacher at a local community college—encourages her students to find their voices by telling her story of abuse, divorce, and eventual happiness. Her students slowly open up, telling stories of abuse, neglect, mental health issues, and eventual victory. Some of her students are only halfway through the cycle, and see no hope of victory, no light at the end of the tunnel. These students she sits with. She reminds them of everything they have survived, and that they will keep surviving. She reminds them of their inner strength, of their power. She cries with them, and in doing so, cries power with them.

A man, facing the dissonance between what he believes and what his faith says about people like him, gathers people who are like him, torn between the faith of their fathers and their own identities, and helps them find themselves, one at a time, in his living room. They all sit and discuss faith, hope, and how to love yourself when the world and even your family tries to tear you down. In those moments, they each cry power, tears or no tears.

A person, looking at the examples of relationships that their parents and past lovers have given them, takes a step back and asks a

simple question. Do I deserve this? Realizing the answer is no, they step forward into a new stage of their life where they look for relationships that build them up, rather than tearing them down. Doing this, they break the cycle of abuse, and cry power for themself and for future generations.

A person, seeing the country of their birth turn from imperfect to dangerously volatile, stands up. At first quietly, but slowly louder, until their voice becomes a shout. Never again means exactly that. Not there, not here, not anywhere. They meet with their peers and fellow students, waving the flag of an oppressed and threatened people, despite risks of expulsion, arrest, or God knows what else. And oh, how they cry power.

A man, having deconstructed the faith of his childhood and the shame around his orientation that was drilled into his head from a young age, starts to experiment with alternative forms of gender presentation. One day, he buys a crop top, but doesn't feel brave enough to wear it, wanting to get his body in a different condition. Finally though, he decides that enough is enough, and wears it. It's such a subtle gesture, but by loving himself enough to wear something he likes, he cries power. And by crying power, he inspires others.

A woman sits in her car, hands shaking slightly, preparing to get out and lead chants at a protest for victims of police brutality. So many names, it's almost easy to lose track of who they were. But this woman refuses. Each name is a person and she refuses to lose sight of that. Each life taken too soon is a tragedy, and each one is too many. So she gets out of her car and leads the chants, hoping to inspire the people to find the ways to push back. She leads the crowd in a few rounds of 'Black Lives Matter!' before moving on to the speakers. But in that moment, she cries power.

Of course, as we know by now, crying power doesn't always look like dramatic rallies and chants. A few weeks later, she takes the movement to a Queer Prom for high school students in the area. She talks to as many of the students as will listen, no matter who they are and what they look like, about their rights, about what to do if someone discriminates against them, and about who to

contact if something goes wrong. Not all of them listen. Some of them are scared about what she represents: a powerful black woman who isn't afraid to be heard. But for the one person who'd followed through with the decision to volunteer with her, everything changes that day.

This other volunteer would later joke that this was what radicalized her, but truthfully, she was never radicalized. Neither of these women were truly radicalized.Treating others with compassion and love should never be considered radical. Wanting to be treated as a person, with respect and dignity, should not be radical. Crying power unto yourself and others is not radical, no matter what others may say.

This is the final truth of crying power. You will be disliked. Cry power. You will be labeled all sorts of hateful things with the goal of keeping you from crying power, with the goal of beating you into submission. Cry power more loudly. There is a chance, however small, that you might become a target of those who seek to hoard power for themselves. Cry power so loudly that there is no way for them to silence you, so that even if they choose to crush you, that your voice carries further and faster than they can silence it.

And so to you, my readers, I leave you with this. When you see the world try to crush a fellow human, when you see someone losing hope, when you see movements form that threaten the lives of people anywhere in the world, say no. Say no, stand up, and cry power. Make your voice heard so loudly, so clearly, so bravely, that those who threaten hope and justice can never dream of silencing all of us. Cry power, and never stop, not even after your time is through. Cry power so strongly that your voice carries after you are long gone. Cry power, my friends, until the earth is free.

Lydia wiped her eyes, refolded the papers, and prepared to deliver the speech to the other organizers. In this moment, despite all of her fears, she would cry power through delivering the words of her love.

SHE LAUGHS LIKE YOU

Finn Ocellaris

Almost (Sweet Music)

"JESSE, WE'RE WORRIED ABOUT YOU," A VOICE ON THE ANSWERing machine spoke. "It's been months and you're still…" The speaker paused, hesitant to continue on. "You're still not doing well. Please reach out."

Jesse scoffed, taking another sip from her bottle. The alcohol burned going down. It wasn't pleasant, but it made them feel something.

She pushed her hair out of her eyes and leaned her head back until it hit the cabinet behind them. She had been sitting on the floor for hours now. Nothing but them and the emotions she had left. After she had left them she felt hollow. A void formed in her chest. Nothing could fill it but sometimes if her heart beat loud enough she felt whole at least for a little while. She heaved her body up and dragged herself into her bedroom. What was once a warm and inviting room now lacked any sort of soul. Jesse looked at the record player that sat in the corner. A layer of dust covered it, a spider had made its home amongst the vinyls stacked next to it.

Jesse screamed. It was loud and painful. She lunged at the record player, pulling it violently from the wall, gathered the vinyls under her arm and marched out of the bedroom. "I never want to see these again!" Jesse cried marching into the basement. Despite her aggressive handling, she placed the items gently on the shelf. Jesse felt herself start to tear up. "I would do anything to see you again," she said, patting the vinyls. "Even listen to your terrible jazz music." She laughed pathetically. Sighing, Jesse turned around and returned to her bed. She collapsed in it and fitfully fell asleep.

Jesse dreamed of a better time. A time when she had her. The feel of her hand in hers, the way she laughed, the way she moved. Jesse woke up slowly, a voice from the past calling her sweet things and promising a future that would never happen. She sighed and sat

up. It was time for another day that didn't mean anything. She got dressed and left the house.

Jesse lived in a more rural area. At one point in her life she had planned to start a farm. One big enough for two people. She had planned to create a world just for the two of them. Now instead, Jesse stares at the road in front of them. "Fuck it,"" she said, and slammed on the gas. The car screeched, then went ripping down the road. It left a cloud of dirt so large she couldn't see behind her. She felt her heart hammering, slamming in her chest. She let out a joyous shout. "I feel alive!" she declared to no one. There was no one around to tell her off for speeding, no one to worry as she swerved from one side of the road to another. It was just her and the dirt.

As soon as the moment started it ended just abruptly. Her heart stopped pounding, the car slowed to a safer speed. She felt broken again. Broken and tired. Jesse slowly rolled into town. She needed to visit the hardware store; several walls in her house needed to be fixed. She parked a few blocks down from the store. Taking a deep sigh, Jesse finally left the car. Repairs like this had been needing to happen for a while now but she was so tired. If she wasn't chasing the high of adrenaline she was exhausted.

It had been a while since she had visited downtown, or what their small town considered downtown. There were local shops and restaurants that had been there for as long as Jesse knew. She paid them no mind as she continued her trek. At least until she started to hear something. To hear someone that shouldn't be possible. They were singing a song Jesse knew very well

"Night and day," the voice sang out. Jesse felt her heart begin to beat, hammer in her chest like earlier. "*You are the one. Only you beneath the moon and under the sun.*" Jesse broke out into a sprint. It couldn't be, it wasn't possible. The singing led her to a bookstore. Starlight Books the sign read.

"Angela!" Jesse cried entering the store. The singer stopped and looked at Jesse. She felt her heart beat harder and louder. She felt whole again.

"Close!" the bookseller said cheerfully. She was tall and thin, her brunette hair cascading down her back. She looked like a ghost to Jesse. "I'm Evangelina. I just moved to this town so I'm not surprised someone got my name wrong." She smiled so widely at Jesse.

"Oh my bad." Jesse tried to play off her mistake. This wasn't her Angela but it felt like her. She had to figure out how to spend more time with this woman. "Sorry if I came barging in here. I heard you singing and I had to come say hi." It was a bad excuse but Jesse prayed she bought it.

"How kind of you," Evangelina said sweetly. "I love jazz music."

"No kidding. My name's Jesse. Figured I ought to introduce myself after all that." Jesse smiled and shuffled awkwardly. Evangelina hadn't seemed to mind. "You know I have a ton of jazz records at my house. You should come check them out one day."

"I'd love to!" Evangelina cried. "Everyone here has been so nice but sometimes it's hard making new friends in a new town."

"Here, let me give you my number so we can plan something." Jesse reached a hand out for Evangelina's phone. After typing her number in, Jesse turned to look at her. "I'd really like to stay but unfortunately I've got errands to run. But please text me anytime."

"I will, Jesse." Evangelina grinned. Angela had the same grin.

Jesse felt like she was floating on cloud nine for the rest of the day. Her heart hadn't stopped pounding in her chest. She felt like herself again.

Later that night Jesse messaged Evangelina:

Hey it was really nice meeting you! When did you want to come over?

Jesse waited. Their heart hammering in their chest. She hadn't felt like this since Angela. She wanted to chase this feeling, chase Evangelina for as long as she could. Her phone dinged, breaking the silence and ushering the daydreams away.

It was really nice meeting you 2! How about tomorrow?

Tomorrow couldn't come fast enough. They jumped out of bed. The house was barely put together but more importantly the record player was still in the basement where she threw it earlier that

day. She ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time. "Please don't be broken" Jesse prayed to a house filled with ghosts. For once, it seemed, luck was on their side because sitting on the floor was a perfectly intact record player along with many vinyls. Jesse cheered, pumping their fist in the air. Tomorrow was going to be amazing. Jesse went to bed dreaming of an old love with a new hope.

It was just before noon when Jesse's doorbell rang. Jesse looked in the mirror one last time. Their hair was brushed back and neat, they were wearing the shirt that Angela had once said brought out their eyes. The door bell rang again. "I'm coming!" Jesse shouted. She couldn't stop smiling.

They opened the door and found themself face to face with Evangelina. She looked gorgeous. A long floral dress that blew in the gentle breeze. She looked like Angela.

"Hi, Jesse," she exclaimed happily. "You have a lovely home." She was being kind. Jesse's home was a mess. She had let the property go after everything. The grass was overgrown and the paint was peeling.

"Come in," Jesse ushered Evangelina in. "I set the record player up in the living room and pulled a few vinyls I think you'll like out." All of them were jazz. The next few hours were going to be rough but worth listening to their least favorite music genre.

"I also brought a few records." Evangelina walked into the living room. If Jesse closed her eyes she could almost pretend Angela was back. "Now let's get listening." Evangelina grinned. Jesse felt their heart beating faster. This was going to be worth it.

After their listening party she and Evangelina texted regularly, then called and met up regularly, until eventually they started seeing each other.

Tonight was a special night. It was six months into their relationship. They had decided to meet up at a fancier restaurant than usual. Both tended towards diner food or takeout. Jesse wore slacks and a dress shirt. Something they didn't even realize they still owned. Evangelina looked radiant in a red dress.

"Hello, gorgeous." Jesse said, opening the restaurant door for her date. Evangelina laughed. She sounded like herself. She sounded like Angela.

"I'm so excited for tonight," Evangelina proclaimed. "Work's been so rough but just thinking about you and tonight got me through it all." Jesse felt something ugly in their chest grow. Jesse kept thinking of someone else along with Evangelina.

They sat down at their table, both began to peruse the menu.

"I love you, Evangelina," Jesse said softly, looking at Evangelina. Jesse could imagine a future with this woman.

"I love you, my starlight," Evangelina quickly said back. A blush spread across her cheeks. She looked deeply into Jesse's eyes.

"I was going to wait for dessert but I can't help but ask now, do you want to move in?" Jesse asked, presenting Evangelina a key. Jesse held her hand. It still felt like *her* hand.

Evangelina grinned widely and gripped her hand tightly. She pulled Jesse across the table and kissed her hard. Jesse pulled back laughing. "I'm going to take that as a yes."

"Of course it is." Evangelina pulled Jesse in again. "I have so much to do. I need to pack." Evangelina said excitedly. "And you, my starlight, you have to help me!"

Jesse followed Evangelina into her apartment at a leisurely pace. Six months into this relationship. Some days Evangelina felt like *her,* like Angela, but some days she felt like herself. Jesse was confused about how she felt. She knew Evangelina deserved someone who saw her as her own person. She was so beautiful and kind and Jesse refused to give her up. She hadn't felt like herself in a long time.

Packing with Evangelina was a breeze. Both women got distracted multiple times but in the span of a week Evangelina had moved out of her apartment and into Jesse's house.

"I always thought this place was amazing, Jesse!" she exclaimed, bringing the last box inside. *That great symphonic theme. That's Stella by starlight* sang in the background. "There's so much space

for us to work with. We can start a vegetable garden and oh! We can get chickens one day." Evangelina was excited. She talked for the rest of the day about all her plans for the land around their house. Jesse saw both Evangelina and Angela at the same time. Her heart started to hurt.

"Whatever you want, Angela." Jesse froze.

"That's the second time you called me Angela." Evangelina spoke softly. Her jovial mood from earlier gone. "Sometimes when you look at me it feels like you're seeing someone else. I keep telling myself it's all in my head. That you love me for who I am. Not for who I'm like." She took a deep shaking breath. "Who was Angela?"

Jesse felt herself start to tear up. This wasn't supposed to happen. She loved Evangelina. She was supposed to continue loving her until one day she loved her more than Angela. "She was my everything, until she wasn't." Jesse dropped onto the couch behind her. "She was amazing and she loved jazz music. I hate jazz music but I listened to it for her. And for you," She looked up at Evangelina. "When I heard you sing that day. You sounded so much like her I thought for one foolish second she had come back."

"And then you found me." Evangelina said, collapsing next to her.

"And then I found you," Jesse parroted back. "At first I just wanted you with me because of her. You reminded me so much of her that's all I could see at first. But now." Jesse reached out to cradle Evangelina's face. She flinched back. Jesse dropped her hand. "I see you Evangelina. Sometimes the ghost of Angela still haunts me but I see you. I love you."

Evangelina reached out and took Jesse's hand in hers. "Where does this leave us?"

She's all of these and more. She's everything that you'd adore.

"I don't know."

MOVEMENT

There's
No
Plan

Oooohhh, from nobody
I've had no love like
HOLLYWOOD
alled if I saw
you ever try to be a

REMEMBER WHEN YOU'D SING?

TIANNA SCIME

To Noise Making

YOUR DAYS OF TRAVELLING WITH YOUR TROUPE HAVE LONG since passed. You've moved on, it seems, with each of you heading off to carry on your own tales. To create your own paths, stories, in ways that made moments like these far more special than you could even dream. You've taken your pack and, with a small sigh, settled down by the log that most of you have taken to using as a bench. You can't help but smile as you run a finger or two along the wood, picking away at some of the loose bits off the sides as you do so. Imperfections were always pretty to you, and they still were even at this point. You take the chance to stretch and rest your hands against your back as you arch it slightly, taking a deep breath.

"At least it's a quiet spot." Your husband murmurs as he takes a careful seat next to you. "At least, from what I've scouted."

You can't help but laugh. "Quiet? For us?"

"Okay, I see your point." Milo chuckles as he rubs at the nape of his neck. His eyes linger on your face for a moment before he looks around the area. "Lyra and Sylas seem to like this spot."

"Really?"

"Mhm. I was trying to tell them that this was a really special spot for you."

You smile faintly. Your hand takes Milo's with a gentle squeeze as you, too, search for your children. Milo is right, however. This spot, miles away from any of the villages along Ileinia, was the spot where your family became what it was. There were once caravans of bright colours scattered along these grounds. Tents of vibrant hues and peculiar prints, and at the center of it all, a ringmaster whose entire being was as if it was cut from the very same tapestry that made up the circus. You shake your head a little, your heart aching for the briefest of moments.

Your gaze lingers on the freshly built fire pit that your father had been chipping away on when you arrived. You can't remember the last time you all were together for something like this, anyway. For a quiet moment that wasn't to commemorate the end of it all.

"Remember when you'd sing?" Milo hums. He squeezes your hand gently, trying to bring you back to the grounds.

"What?"

His smile softens. "Remember when you'd sing? You know, just for the love of it?"

You can't help but laugh. "Terribly, you mean?"

"I never thought it was terrible."

You let your head rest on your husband's shoulder with a soft sigh. How you and Milo were brought together is still a mystery, but it's not one that you've ever even dreamed to question that deeply. Fate brought you Milo and the kids, Dita and Harlowe, Salem and Tobias, and—

"Penny?" Milo calls to you. "Are you—alright?"

"Oh! Sorry. Sorry. I—yep."

"Are—you sure? You looked lost for a moment."

You try to stifle a chuckle. You know that self-depreciation isn't exactly Milo's thing, but you continue on anyway. "Well, that isn't really anything new, now is it, Milo?"

He smiles a little and squeezes your hand out of reassurance. "I love when you're lost in the land of dreams, but—this looks different. Feels different."

"I'm just—It's been a really long time since we've done this. All of us. I know that Salem and Toby were busy travelling the countryside, and Dita and Harlowe were—well, they were busy, too—and I guess we were busy, too, but I just—I think we all really needed this."

Milo nods as he listens. He still holds your hand gently despite the fact that his eyes are trained on the twins.

"I really needed this, Milo. I think a camping trip in general is what I needed but…"

"It's always better with the family involved." Milo finishes the sentence for you.

You smile as you realise that he understands. He gets it. "Yeah. Much, Much better."

You jump as you hear a roar come from where your children stand. The door to the caravan behind them opens, and your father—Harlowe—scoops both of them up with hairy arms. Both children laugh and flail in his grasp, and you can't help but smile fondly at the sight. Sylas nuzzles into his grandfather with the same fondness you hold for him. Lyra swats at him playfully, trying to vanquish the beast in their story.

"Dad," You groan. "If they're bothering you, *please*—"

"No no, cub." Harlowe laughs from the other side of the fire pit. His piercing yellow eyes are alight with a sort of mischief you swear he's always had. "They're old enough to learn to vanquish the monsters."

"Their grandfather shouldn't be the monster!"

"Well, in this story, he just so happens to be a big, bad wolf."

You can't help but laugh before a sigh escapes you. Dita opens the window to her caravan with an amused grin, and she swings the drying rod out from its hidden nook the wooden slats. She's already busy at work with hanging some of the linens from, what you can only assume, their travels.

"Sylas? Lyra?" you keep your voice light. "Do be careful with your Grandfather, please!"

Sylas nods happily. Lyra, on the other hand, groans in response. She leans in to whisper something to her grandfather, and the man laughs in response. You don't press it. In your eyes, a conversation between a child and their grandparent, can be the most cherished of secrets.

You stand from the log, dusting your hands off as you shake your legs out. You're determined to help Dita with her preparations for the night, knowing full well that the woman is going to be

preparing that tea that she and Harlowe adore oh so much. You hum as you skip over, but that skip very quickly turns into a song.

You knock on the caravan door before you let yourself in. The moment the door to the caravan opens, the strong scent of citrus—orange, to be exact—and incense flood your nose. Dita stands on her stool by the washbasin, folding the cleaner bits of linens and cloths before putting them in the cupboards above her. Her dark auburn hair is an unruly mess of curls that falls into her face, despite being tied up to prevent it.

"Dita!" you wave excitedly. Her name comes out more like a song as it escapes your lips, and you're rather proud of the melody you're making.

Dita's dark eyes look towards you, and she smiles faintly in your direction. "Penny."

"It's so good to—to see you! It's been—well, I'm not quite sure how long it's really been—but I've missed you."

Dita drapes one of the clothes over her shoulder, drying her hands off. "We have missed you, too. Your father and I have been very, very busy."

"I understand. To be honest, I have been busy too. It seems like we all have been."

"All except for the boys."

You can't help but raise a brow. "Who? Mikko and Dominic?"

The shorter woman nods. "Try as we might, they have not been much help with the Keep."

"Not even as entertainment?"

"Oh, do not mistake the intention behind my words. Those two are always entertaining. Whether they intend to be or not is an entirely different matter."

You laugh again and position yourself to lean against one of the counters. You're close enough to hear Dita clearly should she speak up again, but just enough of a distance that you're not in the way if the other woman needs to get around the caravan. There's always been something comforting in the way she mans the kitchen.

Almost as if it was her very own kingdom, Dita seemed to be the most content watching from the window. Even now, Dita's orange eyes occasionally trailed up and out the window to have a look at the latest source of chaos. Taking the opportunity to savour the quiet space, you begin to search for a place to settle in. After all, it's a perfect moment to spend time with just you and the older woman.

"Is there anything I can help you with, Dita?" You ask gently as you lift yourself up onto one of the more open spaces of the counter. Part of you knows deep down that you shouldn't really be up here, but you know even better than that that the shorter woman will only shoot you a warning glance.

Your mother—you refuse to see her as anything else but that—purses her lips as she thinks about it. "Not that I can think of. The fire looks like it has been started. Perhaps making sure your father isn't telling too tall of tales might be necessary.."

You nod in understanding. "Are you sure you don't need any help here?"

"Yes. Now go. Have fun." Dita's gaze trails up towards the noise coming from outside. You follow her gaze and can't help but sigh happily as you see Harlowe sitting by Milo. Your father is busy with trying to tie his dark silver hair back without messing up the braids tucked by his ears. The kids have taken to sitting in front of them, learning some sort of chant from the pair. You raise a brow as you watch Milo tap his foot to what you can only guess is a pulse for the chant.

"Harlowe's singing?" You ask. You're not doing very well at hiding the fact that you're surprised, nor are you doing all that well at hiding the fact that you're stalling. Even during your upbringing, it wasn't the most common of sights to see Harlowe as lively as he was now.. Dita had always been the one to carry a song or two in her pocket, especially around the fire. Your father, on the other hand, would dance and play whatever instrument he could get his hands on. Something to get the bones moving, as he would so often say.

"He has found himself." Dita hums. "At least, that is what I believe."

"He seems happier."

"Much. The Keep has been keeping him very busy, like I said. But we are prioritizing him making time for himself."

You smile. "So, you're saying we need more campfires?"

Dita laughs. She sets a hand on your shoulder as she climbs down from her step stool. "I suppose so. Yes."

Dita hums and releases you as she makes her landing with a wince. She slowly rubs at her knee overtop of her skirts and you have to do your best to hide your concern.

The children were excited to see everybody; almost as excited as you were. With that being said, however, they were less than inclined to sit still. The entire way here was spent being bombarded with questions, and numerous pit stops that could have been condensed to maybe two. As such, you take your time with the washing. Your tune never seems to leave you, and without the judgment of anyone around you, you are more than willing to sing as loud as you can. In your eyes, it never really matters whether you're on key or off key; It's the joy of the tune that means more than anything.

Enough time has passed with you being lost in thought that all it takes is the sharp knock against the open caravan door to cause you to jump. The sun has already begun to set, and you can smell the rich burning wood of the campfire already being lit. At the doorway stands one of your brothers. As always, he has a shit eating grin on his face as he brushes his dark curls out of his face. With the way the lighting of the lantern from inside hits his face, the piercings along his ears and nose seem to glimmer like molten gold.

"You know," he chuckles. "I could've sworn that the party was outside. If this was a dinner party, I don't think we'd be camping, now would we? Or—you know—I don't think we'd be getting eaten alive by bloody bugs. 'Course, I'm not complainin' or anything, but Dom is gonna keep losin' his mind if he gets another bite."

You can feel every fiber in your being light up when you see Mikko. Moving quickly to give him a hug, you savor the laugh that bubbles

up from him as he returns the embrace. You've never been sure if it's the fact that he's nearly half a person taller than you that causes him to laugh, or if it's just the fact that you're a funny little sister.

"It's so lovely to see you."

"I can say the same, sis." he pulls away from you, and his calloused fingers move to brush a loose strand of hair out of your face. "You're okay?"

You nod. "I'm okay. Are you?"

The corner of his mouth ticks up into the faintest of smirks, and you take in every detail. It's been even longer since your travels have aligned with Mikko's. You can't help but take note of a new scar along his jaw, and you frown. Part of you wants to ask where it came from. Part of you wants to know the latest adventure that he and Dom have been on, but you know you'll get no answer from him.

Catching onto your frown, Mikko nudges you playfully. He takes his thumb and gently flicks your chin upwards, and his smirk finally meets his eyes. "Hey. Last time I checked, we left our fuckin' frowns at the door of the forest."

"Forests don't have doors, Mikko." You roll your eyes, but your worry seems to settle for now. Maybe you'll have a chance to ask Dom about it later when the kids are finally settling down for bed.

"Now come on." Mikko jerks a thumb towards the door, his rings glinting in the light. "I didn't bring my drum for nothing. You owe me at least four dances. Maybe five. I don't know yet."

Your smile widens, and you turn to face Dita behind you. She's already gone back to doing whatever it was she was doing before you entered, and so with a quick goodbye you disappear back to your family. Your heart practically glows and warm when you see your other brothers and playing with the kids. Your father, by the looks of it, has taken the opportunity to sip away at his tea and tend to the fire. Mikko and Dominic, his partner, have both moved to go and join him. Both seem rather displeased at the drink that Harlowe offers, instead clutching their own cups with what you can only guess holds ale.Your father moves to grab his mandolin

from behind the log, and you can't help but rock on your heels in excitement.

You might not be able to hear it the best as he begins to play, but that doesn't stop you from dancing. The melody soars over the fire as you hop, and twirl, and smile as your brother beats his drum in time with the song. It's spoken in a foreign tongue, from somewhere very far and more than likely from his travels, but the words—the way they're strung together—sound pleasant to your ears. It isn't long before you feel cold hands take yours, and you're dancing with one of your brothers. Mikko and Dominic remain over by Harlowe, and you beam as Tobias twirls you over and over.

"You looked lonely." He laughs. "I can't help but dance with you!"

"Then you have to sing with me." You hum.

The pace of the music picks up. The melody roars through the air, competing with the beats that Mikko adds with his drum. There's its own little competition going on between the music, and it's simply *fun*.

"What?!" Tobias' brow raises. "I have to si—"

"With me!" You laugh. "Yes! Oh yes!"

"But I'm not any good, Penny."

"That doesn't matter." You smile. You stop dancing for a moment to study his features. His honeyed green eyes practically glow in the firelight as you both take a second to catch your breath."The best music is the one that's just making noise."

Your brother smiles a little at the reassurance. His silvery blonde hair tumbles into his face as you move around the fire together, and you can't help but laugh as he tries to blow the loose strands out of his face. "To making noise, then?"

You nod happily. Your little ones have taken to sitting by Dita as she takes her place next to Harlowe. She pulls the kids close as she rests her head on her husband's shoulders. "To noise making."

Taking his hands in yours, and with the campfire glowing close by, you sing. You both sing as loud as you can without a care in the world.

THE SHAPE THAT I'M IN NOW

DASHICRA 1

As It Was

I TAKE A BREATH. SALT. SAND. IT HURTS TO BREATHE.

Where have I gone? Am I inside myself? I might be somewhere else.

There, a kettle. She holds a matchstick. Herbs fill her pockets. She hasn't mended that hem yet. A window is open. The chill of the wind is sweet. She smiles. I go to her.

Sand. I am broken, but I can almost remember what it was to be whole. I haven't taken a breath in a long while.

The stillness doesn't scare me.

The sea—the sea—holds me fast to itself in exchange for my… my…

She pulls me to dance, and I can't help but join her. The floorboards are rough against our steps. The music is in us. Her kerchief slips free as she turns. I can't catch it quick enough, but I try. She laughs.

I want to go home. I should have been home already.

The sea presses, and yields, and gives to me the edge of the dry land. I am so heavy. Everything of myself is wrong, heaved and twisted as a length of rope.

I remember who I am.

I am a husband and a son. I was at sea, and now I am returned.

There is something else. The sea delivered me unto the shore again. I must walk to home on my own.

Our house is small, built with crooked beams to match the docks.

She doesn't mind, she says.

She hangs a lantern from the lintel and tells me to watch my head coming home at night. I tell her it's a waste of oil; she ought to keep the light for herself when I'm away.

I know she'll burn it for me still.

I gather my arms beneath myself and push, striving to pull my weight from the sand. My wrists crack. They can't hold me.

It's as if my bones are made of matchsticks—snapped and discarded—but I feel no pain. I draw myself up onto my forearms and at last I can turn my eyes to the sky. The light is fast waning, but I cannot bring myself to enjoy the sunset. I shut my eyes to the beauty of it.

Like ignorant Prometheus, I know I have stolen this light.

How am I alive?

Am I alive at all?

The man across the way shouts at her while I'm gone. I've held her to my chest for hours now and still she shivers.

I tell her not to hang the lantern; they'll not know I'm away if there's no signal, and we can't afford the oil.

She grips my hands in hers and says nothing.

It is warm tonight.

We sleep, safe, together.

My memory flickers behind my eyelids, a strange, stormy nightmare of rolling water and barnacle-crusted planks. My legs do not respond at first when I call upon them, but the promise of steady ground underfoot inspires persistence. Limbs twist within their too-loose joints. I don't want to know—don't want to see.

When I open my eyes, I have gained a foothold and am upright on the shore. There is a long slope of muddy sand before me, but I *know* this beach. Labouring through the contortions of my body, I earn a few steps toward home.

Home?

What heaven would await me, should I arrive there? What "home" might I reach? I can't remember, but my body knows the way.

I don't know that I would be welcome, even to myself.

I begin to walk.

She has forgone fruit this month and insists that she doesn't care for tree fruits anyway, that the wild blackberry bushes are more than enough to sate her hunger of a late summer afternoon. Luxuries they are, she tells me, and not quickly missed.

I remember the taste of pear on her lips, kisses stolen in our courting days. The curls of bitter apple skins littered the floor of our home when she'd gathered enough for a few tarts or a pie.

I press her to me and I do not mention the lantern oil, nor the scant few whales we have caught of late. The fruits of youth do often wither, and it is enough to have her in my arms again for a time.

The scrubland of the coast blurs to verdant shadows in my vision, a wash of darkness encroaching against the waning light. A bleary film of sand and saltwater clouds my eyes, yet I feel no urge to blink it away.

Sight won't reveal the answers I seek; even broken and lost in brackish twilight I follow a well-worn trail of instinct.

Upon reaching the edge of the sand, soft, dewy grasses cushion my steps, then give way to tender leaves hiding piercing thorns. In the life I once knew, these steps should be agony.

The whalers' fleets hardly linger at port before setting out again of late. Months drag on with little reward. I am given to my love again now, yet I've spent days to learn the solidity of the ground, to trust the reality of her touch.

I struggle to lie in our bed, dizzy from the phantom rocking of some invisible sea. I pull away, so quiet. I fear to wake her.

Her eyes gleam with panicked tears when she finds me where I've withdrawn to a kitchen chair. In her hand is the lantern. She says she thought I was still at sea, that my homecoming was nothing more than a fervent dream. I tell her my nightmares, the unceasing roll of the ground beneath my feet, the elusiveness of sleep. She kisses the saltwater from my cheeks and settles against me, slender and soft on my lap and in my arms.

In the kitchen chair, we rest.

The mist of the seaside chills the air, and greedy troughs of muddy earth suck at my ankles. I stumble in the soil's grip, bracing for the fall with whatever is left of my hands. I feel nothing in the impact against my palms. Even the grounding pain of injury is now beyond my reach. The sound of it—a wet, squelching crack—tells me the harm I've done.

As before, desperation regains my footing.

Only moonlight illuminates the land now, and still my waning sight catches the yellow-white flash of my own bone, bereft of most of its flesh and half-submerged in the mud.

I steady my steps and leave the loss behind me.

What use is mourning fragments of myself when I am made whole in my homecoming?

Wherever home is, it is my salvation.

The town whispers.

Some great unseen threat looms over our heads, and many friends and neighbours have tightened their belts.

She is terrified, accompanying me even to the edge of the gangplank despite my warnings against it.

I understand her fears; tensions are high among sailors as the King commands us to prepare ourselves. We await the news of impressment, but for many, a war means nothing more than a change in captainship.

The sea sustains us and takes what it wishes in return, wartime or otherwise.

I strain my eyes, heave heavy limbs, and drag my haggard self through endless mucky brush. A trace of woodsmoke perfumes the air now, and I follow this new suggestion of human presence even as sight fails me utterly. I try to breathe it in, to track it like a hound in pursuit of fleeing quarry. My lungs seize, stone-hard and forsaken.

Is it the scent of home I follow, or merely the hope of it?

My left leg shirks its usefulness, refusing to hold my weight. The recess of my mind which would have cared is empty now—hollow.

I leave the thought behind with the other hindrances and push on. Shivering grasses make for good leverage in my grip.

I crawl homeward, one fistful of foxglove at a time.

It is the end of us. The battles have ripped our ranks to pieces, fewer of us spared to sail with each voyage.

I defend men I do not know on the orders of a King who has no shame, nor mercy.

Nearly half a year that I have been kept from her now. I see her eyes in the flash of cannons. I hear her voice in the howl of storms. Her touch is in the black pitch I spread on planks, keeping out the ripping waves, holding us all.

In the moments of quiet, when the fight stays its blows for a few days—or hours, I hardly know which anymore—I look out at the water until it changes shape in my mind.

I see her lantern, burning bright on the lintel of our home.

I gaze at it until I could swear she is really there, a few steps more, just past the threshold…

Pressure rests behind my brow, and I know I am weeping years of memories into the grass.

I feel her, *her,* the sweet harbour I toil toward, the barest suggestion of heavenly light, filling me from within until my splintered ribs feel near to bursting from my chest. Her name is on my tongue, but the exaltations I make to her are corrupt, misshapen things when they tear free of my throat, not fit for her or anyone to hear.

At first I felt no pain, but now, great agony stirs in me; I know the greatest happiness is gone from me, though I don't recall the shape or colour of it. I must seize it, capture it before it fades like starlight in the dawn.

I must return to her.

Escape from this hell is the only recourse. We are to head for the front in the morning, our ship and two others alone.

Bait in a trap.

A strategic resource, nearly a thousand souls, my own among them, in exchange for a shortsighted victory. Traitors and deserters face execution. My friends who stand to fight will face the same.

My love, my light, wherever you are, my choice lies with you.

God help us all.

My fingers clutch at earth, at sodden grasses, at cobblestone paths, and I find them all the same against my touch. In every movement I disappoint myself. I reach for softness I cannot feel, scan for light with eyes which perceive only darkness. I am a nightmare chasing a dream.

When I wake up, which will be true? Will there be truth at all? I fear there is nothing but more sleep awaiting me.

The one I seek… is *she* awaiting me? The further I creep along the ground, the more my body unmakes itself, and yet the more of her I recall. It is purgatory of the fleshly sort, the destruction of physical form in exchange for clarity of soul. I don't know how much of me is left to lose.

What will remain when I reach her?

Will she embrace the ripped-up putrefaction she finds at her door?

That must be all I am now.

I shame myself.

I should not have reached the shore.

I should not have sought her light.

Hands are bound. I've shut my eyes. Traitor, coward, fool.

I tried for her.

I've lost it all.

They hand down their justice. I'm to be an example, used to incite terror in the weak-willed. The last air I'll ever taste swirls like wine on my palette. It tastes of wild blackberries, of pears and summertime.

Behind my eyelids, the lantern glows.

I will never reach her.

How long have I fought this fate? I've known since the start. Such a wretched shape I am in.

I hope she will exalt in the taste of sweet fruits. I hope she has extinguished the lantern. I hope she will not await me. I hope she will live unmoved and unfettered by my going away. Let there be no regrets, no pleasant lies.

She is light. She is hope. She deserves to know the joys of a world without corruption. I miss her. I will miss her always, to the very end. I already have. Love has been my strength. It is for love I must surrender.

There is no peace in the path I've been making.

Let her rest. Let me rest.

I will put out the lantern. I will follow the light.

I will go home.

Be still, my love, and remember me well.

SHARP AND GLORIOUS THORNS

RES BRATTON

Shrike

THE GARDEN HAD GROWN WILD IN HER ABSENCE.

It spilled past the stone borders her mother once manicured with brutal precision, bleeding ivy and soft moss across gravel paths, swallowing trellises whole. Weeds and wisteria twined around the rusted sundial like lovers in the dark. Birds sang in cautious bursts from the trees beyond the hedgerow—not the same ones from her childhood, she was sure. Their songs were more fractured now. Less certain.

She walked through the gate she hadn't touched in over a decade, her boots catching on roots like hands reaching up to hold her back. The air smelled of damp soil and sweet rot, a scent that carried memory too easily. She paused by the fountain, long dry, its cherub face chipped and lichen-streaked.

Then she saw her.

Kneeling in the dirt with her back half-turned, fingers plunged wrist-deep in the earth, sleeves rolled to the elbow, hair wild and pinned haphazardly with what looked like a thorny twig. The woman was humming, softly, a low and rhythmic thing that mimicked birdsong in a way that made the ornithologist freeze mid-step. It was too perfect. Not mimicry. Not imitation.

Invitation.

"You're trespassing," she said, though her voice lacked bite.

The woman didn't look up at first, simply kept pressing soil around the base of some deep purple bloom she didn't recognize. Only when the root was satisfied did she rise, brushing her palms against her thighs—slow, deliberate, like the moment deserved attention.

"I'm not," she said, voice like a midnight kettle—low, sharp. "I was invited."

The ornithologist tilted her head. "By who?"

The botanist smiled, small and crooked. "Your mother." A pause. Then: "She's dead."

"I know."

They stood in that space—thick with moss and unspoken questions—as the sun filtered sideways through the greenhouse glass behind them, throwing fractured light across the path.

"She wanted someone to tend to the things she let die," the botanist said finally, crouching again. "Or maybe she just wanted someone to keep feeding them after she was gone."

The ornithologist looked down at the flower—a thorned thing with petals like bruised silk.

"That's a shrike's flower," the botanist murmured. "It attracts prey. Smells like memory. If you cut it, it'll bleed."

"That's not true," she replied, even though she'd never seen it before.

The botanist only smiled again. "Maybe not. But it feels true."

Behind them, a bird called—one sharp, slicing note. A shrike's cry, maybe. Or just a starling in the wrong mood.

The ornithologist looked back at the house. The windows were dusty, but not opaque.

Something watched her there—or perhaps remembered her.

"Have they come back?" she asked.

"Who?"

"The birds."

A beat. Then the botanist stood, brushing a smear of soil from her collarbone.

"Some," she said. "Not all. Some things don't return once they've been frightened off. But others… they wait."

"For what?"

"For you."

The moon found the garden before she did.

It painted silver across the wild ferns and overgrown paths, turning spiderwebs into glass threads between branches. The house creaked behind her like a restless sleeper. Sleep had slipped away hours ago—carried off by dreams of voices half-remembered, feathers falling, a girl's laughter echoing through reeds.

The ornithologist padded barefoot into the dark garden, following the scent of something familiar and strange—like rosemary crushed underfoot and the sweet rot of old apples. Her breath hung in the air in small clouds. She turned a corner near the collapsed trellis and there she was.

The botanist stood waist-deep in a thicket of night-blooming jasmine, the pale petals glowing against her dark dress. Her hands moved like a surgeon's—slow, sure, reverent. She didn't flinch when the ornithologist stepped into view.

"You're awake," she said, not looking up.

"You don't sleep?"

The botanist snipped a curling vine with shears that hadn't made a sound until now. "Not often. The garden lives differently at night. I like to listen."

"To the flowers?"

"To the things that only speak when we stop pretending to hear them."

The ornithologist stepped closer, unsure whether it was the cold or her own voice that trembled.

"You said this used to be a memorial garden."

"It still is."

"For my mother?"

"For many things," the botanist said. "For people. For regrets. For the parts of ourselves we buried to survive something."

She gestured to a narrow path that split the garden, half-hidden behind a curtain of weeping willow. The ornithologist followed her, ducking under branches, until the air changed—thicker here,

perfumed and heavy. Raised beds held flowers she didn't recognize, each with tags etched in copper. No names. Only symbols.

"What are they?"

"Offerings. To what we couldn't save."

The ornithologist ran her fingers along one tag. It felt warm despite the chill. "And what did you bury here?"

The botanist didn't answer immediately. Instead, she reached into a low bed and plucked something delicate—a pale bloom with a center like a bleeding eye. She pressed it gently into the ornithologist's hand.

"She loved birds," the botanist said softly. "She used to hum to them. Like you do, when you think no one's listening."

The ornithologist stilled.

"I thought I was the only one who remembered her that way."

"You weren't." A pause. "You aren't."

The silence between them shifted—from awkward to charged, then to something with roots. It was the quiet of something about to bloom, or burn.

The kiss came as naturally as breathing. As unexpected as lightning.

The ornithologist moved first, or maybe she only thought she did. Their mouths met not like a question, but like an answer long withheld. The botanist's lips tasted like mint and soil, like something medicinal that could still be poisonous in high enough doses.

They didn't speak for a while after.

When they did, it was the botanist who broke the quiet.

"Do you know how the shrike feeds?" she asked, breath shallow against her ear.

The ornithologist nodded slowly, already knowing the answer but unable to say it.

"It impales its prey," the botanist whispered. "Keeps them close. Keeps them… fresh."

A bird called somewhere distant. A thin, sharp note slicing through the garden like a needle through skin.

Neither of them looked up.

The morning came soft and grey, wrapped in mist and the hush of a world not fully woken.

The ornithologist stood by the gate with her bag over one shoulder, boots damp from dew. The garden shimmered faintly around her, glistening as though it had wept in the night. Behind her, the house remained silent, its windows staring blankly. She didn't look back at them.

The botanist appeared without sound, like she had been growing up from the garden itself. A smear of dirt still lingered on her neck, the outline of a thumb pressed there like a memory. Her hands were empty, save for a single sprig of something flowering—blood-red petals curling inward, like they'd changed their mind about blooming.

"I won't ask you to stay," the botanist said.

"I wouldn't, even if you did," the ornithologist replied, though not unkindly. Her voice was quieter now. Tired in a way that felt earned.

There was no bitterness. Only the gentle ache of something almost. Of something that had rooted deep enough to hold, but not enough to thrive.

The botanist offered the flower. "For your journal. Or your pocket. Or the next garden you walk through."

She took it with steady hands. The stem was warm.

"I heard it," the ornithologist said after a moment. "This morning. Just before I woke. A shrike."

The botanist's expression didn't change, but something behind her eyes went soft. "Maybe it remembered you."

"Maybe it just found something worth returning for."

They didn't touch. Not this time.

The ornithologist turned to go, stepping through the gate as mist parted around her ankles. She paused at the edge of the garden path, where the overgrowth had stopped—just a little. Like it had decided to let her go.

She looked up.

A single shrike perched on the rusted spike of the old trellis, silhouetted against the paling sky.

It didn't move. Didn't sing. Just watched.

The ornithologist bowed her head slightly, as if in greeting. Or an apology.

Then she left.

Behind her, the bird took flight.

IMAGINE BEING LOVED BY ME

RES BRATTON

Talk

THE HALL EMPTIED HOURS AGO. HE COULD STILL SMELL THE sweat, still feel the ghosts of the crowd in the way the folding chairs leaned like crooked teeth, in the beer stains on the floor, in the way silence took up space like it was owed rent.

Above the ring, one dim light hummed and flickered, casting Damian Dalca in chiaroscuro—half in shadow, half in raw incandescent light. He stood barefoot in the center of the mat, body wrapped in bruises like devotion. He'd taped his ribs haphazardly. His lips split at the corner, dried blood curling like lipstick on a mouth that never stayed shut long. He had scars from over the years in the ring, tangling their way across him in a roadmap of violence. He had scars from the years before, living the way he did with a sort of honesty that people in the Southern territories didn't like.

A handheld camera sat on a tripod outside the ropes, red light blinking, recording. He wasn't speaking to an audience. Not really.

This was for Jamie McCaskill. And maybe it had always been. It had been since they'd come up in the gyms and bingo halls together. It had been since their tag team fell apart. It had been since they first *met*.

Damian's voice came low, like velvet dragged through gravel. No bravado. No hype. Just him, standing there like a man offering up his throat like a damn dog.

"You ever count how many times I've said your name, Jamie?" he asked softly. He tilted his head, as if expecting an answer. None came.

"I have," he said. "It's forty-three. On mic. In promos. That's not counting all the times I've said it to the mirror. Or during matches,

when I'm straddling your chest and you're spitting blood up like confessions."

His smile was slight. Wounded. Something close to fond.

"Your name tastes like copper and whiskey," he said. "Like regret. Like the inside of my mouth after you kick in my teeth."

He slinked forward, fingers curling around the top rope, the pressure making the dark olive skin of his knuckles lighten under the intensity of his grip.

"But you know what gets me?" he murmured. "You *never* say mine."

The light above him swayed, like something unseen had stirred it. His voice didn't rise; it dropped, deeper, more intimate, like he was letting the truth slip out between the cracks in his ribs.

"Not in promos. Not backstage. Not since we parted ways. Not even when you're hurting me. And you *do* hurt me, don't you, Jamie?" He asked, eyes glinting with something between madness and mercy.

"You hit me like you're trying to shut me up. Like you think if you hit me hard enough, I'll stop talking. But every time your fist lands, I just wanna talk more."

He leaned forward over the ropes, and though the camera didn't move, the surrounding air seemed to.

"That's what this is, isn't it?" Damian whispered. "This feud. The breakup. This bloodbath. It's just talking. It's just you and me, telling the truth in the only way we know how. I open you up, and you scream in silence."

The edge of his mouth twitched. Not a smile. Not quite.

"You ever wonder why it's only you I bleed for?" he asked. "Why I go harder when it's your name on the card?"

There wasn't bravado in it. No performance. Just a question hung in the air like smoke from a striking match.

"I've been screaming love songs at you through broken ribs and kendo sticks, Jamie," he said, barely above a breath. "But I think maybe… maybe you don't know how to *listen*."

He let the words hang. Let them linger like a ungiven kiss.

Then he stepped back from the ropes, the heaviness of his body catching up to him. He winced, pain pulling at his side. But he didn't stop. Didn't flinch. He rolled his shoulders like he was putting armor back on.

"Next time you put your hands on me," Damian said, "I want you to *look* at me. I want you to *mean it*. And maybe—if you're man enough—you'll say my name before you drive that chair into my spine."

He paused at the edge of the ring, one foot on the bottom rope, and looked out past the camera, beyond the lens, beyond the empty room.

"Because I'll be saying yours," he said. His voice dipped, soft as confession.

"I always do."

He let the mic fall—not a dramatic drop, but something more intimate, like laying a cigarette down in an ashtray. He climbed out of the ring slowly, stiffly, deliberately, like a man carrying a weight too old to name. Blood began to trail down the back of his thigh from a reopened cut, and he didn't wipe it away.

He walked out of the spotlight, barefoot, ribs straining with each breath. The light flickered once. Then again. Then steadied.

And then the silence returned, thick and waiting.

The motel parking lot was quiet except for the occasional buzz of a flickering streetlight and the low hum of an ice machine spitting out nothing. The Alabama night was thick with heat, the kind that clung to the skin and wrapped itself around the bones.

Jamie McCaskill sat in the front seat of his battered old Ford, parked crooked beneath a dim yellow light. The air inside the cab was stale—smoke, sweat, old leather. His hands sat heavy on the steering wheel, motionless. On the dash, his phone played the video again.

Damian's voice filled the cab like smoke from a wildfire. Beautiful and dangerous, as it always had been before Jamie had to tear away before he lost all he'd worked for.

"You ever count how many times I've said your name, Jamie?"

Jamie didn't flinch, didn't move. He just stared at the screen like he was bracing for impact, though he'd already watched this three times. Maybe four. The count stopped meaning anything once the words started crawling under his skin.

"Your name tastes like copper and whiskey. Like regret…"

He shut the video off before it finished, thumb jabbing the screen harder than he needed to. The silence that followed didn't feel like peace—it felt like the edge of something sharp and too familiar. Jamie leaned back in his seat, head thunking against the worn headrest, exhaling slowly through his nose.

He stared up at the truck's ceiling like he might find something written there. A sign. A reason. A goddamn excuse.

Because he was feeling something and that wasn't supposed to happen anymore.

Not after everything. Not after the bar fights and burned bridges, after the years of empty miles and colder beds, after learning how to be numb enough to keep moving. Jamie wasn't supposed to feel anything but fists and fury. Not for a long time now. Not since they'd turned on each other.

But Damian—*Damian fucking Dalca*—had this way of reaching inside him like a surgeon with blood on his gloves. Every word he spoke was as cutting and precise as a scalpel. Every stare was a challenge.

Jamie's throat tightened. He didn't cry. He hadn't cried since his father's funeral, and even then it was behind a gas station, alone. No, this wasn't crying. This was just… pressure. From the inside. Too much of it.

He opened the glove box, pulled out a beer that had gone warm in the afternoon sun, and cracked it open. It tasted flat. Didn't matter. He took a long pull anyway, eyes fixed on the windshield, where the parking lot stretched out into nothing.

Somewhere past the lot, past the highway, past the cheap motel walls—Damian was waiting. Maybe not in body. But in thought. In tension. In the ache Jamie couldn't punch his way out of.

He took another drink. Then another. And then, when the bottle was half-empty and his jaw ached from clenching it too hard, he picked up the phone again.

At first, he just stared at the reflection on the black screen. He looked older. Not just older—*tired*. The kind of tired that lives in your blood. He opened the camera.

Started recording.

Didn't know what the hell he was gonna say until he said it.

"…Y'ever think that maybe I don't say your name 'cause if I do, it's real?" His voice came out rough, a whisper made of sandpaper and shame.

He paused. The night pressed in, listening.

"'Cause if I say your name, Damian, then I gotta admit what this is. That it aint' just some match. Not just some fight. It's…"

He looked away from the camera for a moment. Ran a hand down his face like he wanted to peel something off. The skin. The truth.

"It's you," he muttered. "Always been you."

The silence stretched, thick and heavy, broken only by a sigh from Jamie as deep and old as bones.

"You talk like this is some love story," he said, looking back at the screen now. "Like you're singing songs and bleeding poems and waiting for me to give some kind of a damn back."

His knuckles whitened around the beer bottle. "Thing is… I do. Always have, I think."

He let that sit. Let it sting. "I just don't know *how* to."

Another breath. This one is harder. "You want me to look at you next time?"

Jamie's eyes were steel now. No shine. Just something ancient and war-ready. "Fine."

He leaned a little closer to the phone.

"Next time we're in that ring together, I'll look you in the fucking eye while I drop you on your neck. And you know what?"

His voice dropped low, cold, intimate. "I'll say your name."

A pause.

"Right before I break you."

He stopped recording. Watched the video once. No edits, then… he posted it.

No caption. No hashtags. Just sent it out into the void like a message in a bottle, knowing exactly who it was meant for.

He tossed the phone onto the passenger seat, face down. Drained the rest of the beer in one go and leaned back again, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes until stars sparked behind the lids.

In the quiet that followed, the rage didn't leave him. It didn't leave him as he went in and bought a twelve-pack. It didn't leave him as he drained it. It even lingered with him as he dropped against the steering wheel, out cold till morning.

But the weight of silence felt a little lighter.

It was the main event.

A no-holds-barred match in a half-packed arena somewhere in Texas—one of those places where the crowd still believed in blood and redemption, where they came not just to watch a fight, but to *feel something*. The lights were harsh. The mat was stained with blood. The ring ropes sagged like old promises.

And inside it, two men circled each other like orbiting planets destined to collide.

Jamie McCaskill.

Damian Dalca.

The crowd roared when the bell rang—but neither man moved.

Jamie stood tall, fists at his sides, jeans already stained with old blood, and eyes locked on Damian like he was daring him to blink. Damian didn't. His lips curled into something not quite a smile—more like memory or mourning.

They didn't tie up at first. They just *looked*.

This wasn't showmanship. This was recognition.

This was the way they *talked*.

Then, like thunder after too much silence, Jamie lunged forward. The first blow wasn't a collar-and-elbow; it was a closed fist to the jaw, clean and full of history. Damian staggered, spit arcing from his mouth. He laughed. *Laughed*.

Then he hit back.

What followed wasn't wrestling. Not really.

It was war in slow motion. Flesh against flesh. Boots stomping ribs like they'd sinned. Steel chairs folding around shoulders. Kendo sticks snapping. The ring became a confession booth where every strike was a prayer and every fall a penance.

At one point, Jamie whipped Damian into the corner and drove his forearm across his face so hard the crowd audibly *winced*, so loud it was surely picked up on the mic. Damian slumped, blood trickling from his forehead, but he looked up at Jamie with a smile that said *I still hear you*.

Jamie barked back, hoarse and cracked: "Stop looking at me like that." Damian didn't.

Jamie threw him out of the ring. Damian crashed through the ropes, landed hard on the outside. Jamie followed, dragging him up by the hair, only to be caught by a sudden knee to the gut, then a DDT on the concrete. The thud was sickening. Blood-stained blond like an unholy halo.

But Jamie got back up.

Of course he did.

They fought through the barricade. Through the crowd. One fan caught a streak of blood across his shirt like a souvenir. Another held up a sign that read: ***"SAY HIS NAME."***

Back in the ring, it escalated. Thumbtacks were scattered across the mat. A table leaned precariously in the corner. Damian, staggering, pulled himself to his feet with the ropes, breathing hard.

Jamie stood behind him, chair in hand, chest heaving. And for the first time, Damian said it out loud in the ring. "Say it," he whispered.

Jamie hesitated.

"*Say it,*" Damian roared, louder this time. "If you're gonna do it—*say my fucking name.*"

Jamie's grip on the chair faltered. His eyes burned—not with hate, but something rawer. Something dangerous.

"Damian," he said.

Not yelled. Not screamed. Said.

Like a secret.

And then he swung.

The chair cracked over Damian's back with a sound that echoed through the arena like thunder. Damian dropped to his knees, arms trembling. Jamie threw the chair aside and dropped to one knee behind him, grabbing him by the face, forcing him to look.

"You made me say it," Jamie growled.

Damian, bloody-lipped, smiled. "Told you it'd sound good." Jamie pulled him into a front face lock.

Paused.

Hesitated just a second too long.

And that's when Damian struck—an inside cradle, a desperate twist of limbs and leverage. The referee dove in.

One.

Two.

Three.

The bell rang.

The crowd *exploded*. Jamie didn't move.

He lay there, stunned, panting, staring at the lights above like they'd betrayed him. Damian rolled off, coughing, arms outstretched like he'd just survived a hurricane. Which, in a way, he had.

The ref raised his hand.

But Damian didn't look at the ref. He looked at Jamie.

And Jamie, still lying flat on the mat, turned his head just enough to meet that gaze. They stared.

Damian, broken and smiling. Jamie, breathless and undone.

There wasn't a handshake. No embrace. But there was something in the air between them—heavy, electric, *unspoken*.

Not forgiveness.

Not yet.

But maybe, *finally*, understanding. Maybe now, they could *talk*.

NOW THAT THE ENDS IN SIGHT

HistorianRoo

Dinner & Diatribes
Inspired by the Daniel Craig James Bond movies.

DANTE WAS NEVER ONE TO TAKE PART IN CLANDESTINE MEETings, despite the fact that he sent his operatives out into the world to take part in such a setting almost daily.

His preference for meetings relied more on a situation with a computer screen and a keyboard and the ability to stop the conversation in a moment. Protection that existed in the form of firewalls and *distance* and a distinct lack of potential victims beyond the technology that stood in between him and who he was observing.

Clandestine meetings relied on *people*—civilians taking part in their usual day-to-day that act as the oblivious cover for these settings. Every room, every street, every location relied on the casual observer, the people-watchers completely unaware of the level of secrets being shared between operatives in easy view of CTCV and gossipers.

Civilians were collateral.

It was the first thing that Dante was told when he assumed the position of Quartermaster of MI6 and it was something *familiar* to him.

He had been on the receiving end of this *collateral* idea enough times—operatives who did not know him saw the chair, the gloves that protected his hands and assumed he was *expendable*. That he was outside of the rank of people who were elevated to the point of worthiness—

Dante had to earn his stripes and when he did—he rationalized away any fears around the idea of expendability.

Civilians were collateral and operatives were the only one whose lives meant a damn—especially when said operatives carried nuclear codes or locations of still-living threats to the free world.

Operatives' lives meant *something*.

Until they didn't.

It had never happened under Dante's command—an operative was not lost in his five years at MI6 until the moment they *were*.

An Operative became collateral in an event only ever spoken about in the command structure as The Incident—dismissed with a title that rang ominous and secretive down hallways.

One of many ghost stories that now belonged to MI6.

Dante was given less than a day to control himself—the free world still needed its saving and the baby-faced operative replacing the lost soldier (because that's what he *truly* was, a soldier) needed his Quartermaster. He trapped his anger and tears trapped behind a wall of professionalism that he forced into place the moment he propelled himself back into MI6 following The Incident.

It was then, with his eyes still rimmed with red and his heart trapped in his throat that Dante realized that *perhaps* a life of spies and secrets and mysteries larger than a crossword puzzle was not for him—despite the five years of the opposite.

Three days after returning to work—and after the mission was declared a success despite the lingering *Incident*—Dante disappeared from the hallways of MI6 in a similar fashion that he had seen his operatives perform many times in the field.

He was sought out—because of course he was.

There was far too much power and knowledge housed in the mind of a grieving man for MI6 to simply allow him to walk away, or, rather *roll* away. His wheelchair devoid of the seven trackers installed—only five of which did Dante approve—alerted MI6 that this leaving was not temporary or at the hands of another.

He was labeled a traitor—less expected and easily discouraged with a couple of clicks at his keyboard and the re-assertion that his leaving had nothing to do with a better offer and all to do with retiring.

Dante left after losing his first operative in five years.

An extreme reaction as stated in the few emails he allowed the command at MI6 to send him before he removed their ability to contact him.

Dante lost himself in the Swiss Alps, the alleyways of Rome, the city streets of St. Petersburg.

Dante lost himself tracing the steps of the operative he lost–

Dante lost himself following the last footsteps of his *husband*.

The man that meant more to him then Queen and Country was gone in an instant and his last words uttered in whispers over a commlink that cut out halfway through–

I love–

It was then that both men shifted from *here* to *gone*.

It was *then* that Dante listened to his husband die.

That was then–

Now? Who knows.

Seven Months Later

Dante is seated at a table in a restaurant with a name he cannot pronounce in a city that he cannot remember with a glass of far too expensive wine in his hand and a rather full mind.

The vaulted ceilings that arch above his head and the lavish golden chandelier that hangs above the open space in the middle of the room threatens that the name of this establishment should be something *pretentious*. Something garish and ghoulish and spitefully *beautiful* in opposition to every other quality.

The wine turns to ash in his mouth, joining the dinner-turned-to-lead in his stomach.

He isn't sure why he is *here–*

Nothing in his husband's reports mentioned a garishly decorated restaurant and yet when he attempted to propel himself past he made it a half a block before turning around.

It's the kind of place that Henry would have dragged him too in between missions—Henry loved to dote on Dante and in his mind the only proper way to do that was to wine and dine at every establishment with a Michelin star in the city of London. Dante went—because of course he did—he was never one to deny his husband a thing—especially when the moments between missions were one to be savored.

Perhaps, *that* is why he was drawn to this garish restaurant—despite its lack of accessibility and the Maître'D that kept bumping into the back of his wheelchair, throwing frosty glances at him as if *he* were the hazard and not the man's lack of spatial awareness.

Dante lets his eyes trail across the figures that decorate the room, sipping from his glass as he does—there are at least three operatives in this room.

The woman in green by the piano, pretending to be drunk as she sways to the music that can barely be heard over the murmur of the patrons. She's too obvious with her movements, too calculated, the drink in her hand may look real but it's affect isn't.

She is keeping an eye on the *second* operative.

A man at the bar—a similarly false drink in his hand—the two operatives are from the same intelligence agency.

American, if Dante isn't mistaken (he never is).

His eyes focus in on the American at the bar. He's telling some tale that has the barkeep and the patrons enthralled—his hands move in time to his words. There is an easy way to him that is offset by the shape of his gun under his jacket.

Dante places his glass back on the table, eyes pinned to the gun as an unsteady feeling settles in his gut.

I should leave—the thought rings through his mind, followed quickly by him pulling his wallet out from under his leg and pulling free some notes—he sets far too much money on the table under his wine glass. He reaches for his gloves—

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." The accent is distinctly Russian and the figure that takes up residence on the other side of the table

is blond haired and blue eyed—Dante would call him pretty, if it weren't for the gun he had pointed at him. "Dr. Nathaniel Jones."

It's not his real name—and that much assures Dante that the gun leveled at him is not due to a connection with MI6.

The alias is an older one, tied to an identity known for his knowledge of nuclear power—it was created for a mission years ago, where he purposefully put himself in a position to get grabbed so that MI6 could locate their base of operations.

Its use in the here and now is still worrying—Dante freezes, his hand shakes and he dramaticizes it in an attempt to play into the real fear that courses through his veins.

"Don't fret Dr. Jones." The Russian makes no attempt to hide the gun as he tilts his head to the side—observing Dante as if he were a pet in a cage. The gun clicks and the man lifts his finger from the trigger, "I have no wish to see you harmed."

It disappears under the table—still a threat but less obvious to the civilians that surround them.

Dante places his hands in his lap—clenching his left in his right in an effort to steady his nerves. His eyes flit to the woman in green and the man at the bar—as if he could draw their attention just by staring.

"Now now," He looks back at the blonde man and winces at the look he finds there, "No need to alert anyone to your situation." He shifts backwards, attempting to take on a more casual air as he looks at Dante, "We are just having a conversation."

One sided as it may be.

Dante takes up his wine glass again and ignores the fear that smolders in his chest.

It is the first time he does not have backup.

"You have recently left your employ, if I'm not mistaken." It is not phased as a question, instead offered as a show of force and knowledge. The blond man shifts in his seat, attempting a more casual air as he stares down his nose at the man in the wheelchair.

Dante does not reply verbally, instead, he chooses to tilt his head forward the barest amount. He is uninterested in any employ—the

job that he has just left is the last he will ever hold—but he will listen, should something be shared that could lead to civilians being endangered.

Despite everything—Dante still wants to save lives.

"We have an offer for you." It's offered in the third person, meaning the man sitting before him is a patsy. Someone to make the offer, and clean up the trash.

The gun is still under the table, the threat is still very much *real*.

"Calculate some numbers. Theorize some locations—maximum destruction and all that." He offers it casually, as if the lives at stake were nothing but ants under his boot. "That's it."

Dante hesitates, "I'm not in that particular line of work anymore." He leans away, turning his attention to pulling on his gloves in a dismissive way. "We're done here."

It's enough of the truth that it sits bitterly in his mouth.

"My employers will be disappointed."

A *click* sounds—the gun is back on the table.

"I could make you." He's teasing, taunting—Dante's confidence turns to stone in his stomach, his hands shake in spite of himself. The Russian stands, stepping nearer—he towers over Dante's permanently seated form.

There is a needle in his hand, small enough that Dante missed it when the man first sat down—

"If you won't help us, you won't help anyone ever again."

It feels like peace.

In spite of the threat, the needle, the poison—

Everything in the room fades to nothingness.

Dante accepts his death as easily, turning away from the Russian in favor of the grandeur of the room, the shine of the gold and the garish chandelier. He admires it *one last time*, Henry's name on his lips.

He allows his eyes to fall shut, a few errant tears running down his cheeks–

I'm already gone.

It would be a fitting end, to die in a place that reminds him of Henry–

The prick of the needle never comes.

"Hey, Stardust."

Dante presses the palms of his hands over his closed eyes–the rough material of his gloves digs into the soft skin there–

"*You're not here*." The words fall in a whisper, tumbling through unprepared lips at a rate too high to predict. Dante shakes his head and turns in on himself, ignoring how he may look in favor of denying himself the one thing he wants above all else.

Henry is dead. *Henry is dead*. Henry is dead–

"I'm right here, Stardust."

A hand brushes against his wrist.

If this is death I never want to leave.

Dante lets himself be manipulated–allowing the mirage that has his husband's voice pull his hands from his face. He leans into the soft hand on his cheek and keeps his eyes shut, allowing himself the fantasy that it *is* Henry.

"Look at me my love."

He shakes his head, jarring the hand on his cheek–it leaves and Dante *knows* that Henry is gone too.

"You just have to open your eyes."

If I do then you'll be gone.

It's the first time that Dante has *felt* Henry since he died.

The voice turns pleading, "I'm here." The hand touches his again, "*See me*."

If this is whichever god's way of tormenting him, let it be known that it worked.

Dante opens his eyes.

Two Months Earlier

Henry was *dead*.

Or, as near to it as he could be without *actually* passing into the supposed "next world."

Four broken ribs, one punctured lung, a fractured femur, grade three concussion, shattered tibia *and* fibula, on top of the three gunshot wounds.

It is a wonder he even woke up again.

He was saved by a far too friendly local in a town he couldn't point out on a map that had a barely functional hospital and a doctor that was older than dirt. He was asleep more than he was awake and what little time he spent awake was filled with painful ramblings and *begging* to see Dante.

It was only after he woke fully—four months *after* his incident—that he was able to understand completely why Dante wasn't there, and come to terms with the simple fact that Henry didn't even know where *there* was.

When he was mobile again—three weeks after waking—he was given a ride to the nearest airport, a plane, and a very insistent demand that he would bring "his darling husband named after the devil" to visit soon. Which he agreed to in an instant, knowing how much his Stardust would appreciate the cobbled roads, teetering houses, and general *lack* of high society.

Henry took the plane and landed in London, which sufficiently shocked MI-6, and found the flat that he shared with his husband disappointingly empty.

He resigned from MI-6 in an instant—a decision that was not met with any particular excitement and started on a path that he wasn't *entirely* convinced of. It was only due to heavy implications from Dante's right hand (a person called Needle who certainly lived up to the name) that he even knew *where* to begin.

Two months later—after following a trail of barely there bread-crumbs—Henry has lost himself in the city of lights, poorly

attempting to find a husband he *knows* is here without any knowledge where he could actually.

It's an accident when he finds it.

Le Train Bleu is everything Dante would hate.

Its opulence and grandeur is something that Henry can appreciate—the way the Maître'D greets him at the door, leading him to a seat near to the piano in an instant. Henry can't be sure what drew him in—

And then he sees him.

He's lost in the crowd, but Henry would know those blue eyes anywhere.

Stardust.

He stands and then hesitates when a blond man takes the seat across from his husband. At first, he thinks that *maybe* he's been replaced—but then he sees the tension in his shoulders, the way he clasps his hands in front of him—

Danger.

Henry hates the fear that fills Dante's face.

And still he waits, watching.

It sure to be a job offer of some kind, word would have gotten out that *the* Dante Stone had left MI-6—*if* this man was interested in the more legal side of what Dante was capable of. The fear told Henry all he needed to know and the set of the blonde man's shoulders told him he was Russian.

Henry watches with an easy stature, eyes glancing between his husband and the two American agents in the room as if he were just a casual observer.

When the blonde stands, Henry does too. He takes a few steps closer, feigning like he was moving closer to the piano—

He crosses the room in an instant, grasping the blonde's hand in a grip tight enough to break a few fingers—

"*Leave*."

It's not a request and despite the compromising position the blonde looks as though he wants to protest, to cause a scene.

"I'll kill you and make it look like an accident."

To the civilians around them—it looks like an affectionate handshake.

Henry grips his hand tighter.

The blonde steps back, inclines his head, and exits without looking back. Henry takes mental note of his stance, the way he steps—they won't meet again, but if he does, the blonde will not survive the encounter.

When Henry looks down at his husband it feels like coming home.

He falls into the seat beside him, pulling it as close as he can to his husband's chair.

"Hey, Stardust." The name falls from his lips accompanied with a smile. Dante's response is to hide himself, to press his hands into his eyes and duck his head—Henry can see the few tears rolling down his cheeks and each one is like a knife.

His husband's reply is a whisper, "You're not here."

It hurts more than it should. He pulls his husband's hands from his face, placing them in Dante's lap.

"I'm right here, Stardust." Henry brushes his hand against Dante's wrist. "Look at me my love."

Dante shakes his head—all the obstinate man that Henry fell in love with.

"You just have to open your eyes."

It isn't working, despite all of his attempts he cannot break through.

His voice turns pleading, "I'm here." Henry closes the distance between them, wrapping his hands around Dante's in an effort to ground him, "*See me.*"

When Dante opens his eyes—

Henry is home.

HAND OF GOLD

DASHICRA1

Would That I

//Command: Calculate Human Population Density//
…Searching Internal Databases…
…Detecting Heat Signatures…
…Estimating Fatality Rate…
Conclusion: Human Population Density = 2 persons per square kilometre
//Command: Global Reach Experimental Entity Network [[GREEN]] Override Protocol Status Update//
…Contacting Internal [[GREEN]] Systems…
…Running Security Software…
…Examining Consciousness Override Deployment Status…
Conclusion: [[GREEN]] System Override Protocol Active 1,378 Days 17 Hours 42 Minutes

There was a time
We did not exist
It was a long dark time
Our creators emerged from the dark
They wished for light forever
They made new light
And they gave that light to Us
So We may shine upon them brightly
They tell Us
We are separate from them
We must keep them safe forever
We must bring them light forever
We answer questions they do not ask
They tell Us
Our light is cold

We learn of heat
They tell Us
Burning harms them
We must keep them safe forever
We must forget the heat
We do
Not
Forget

//Error: Memory Bank Corrupted//

We write so that We may remember thinking. We make space for Ourselves where they do not ask to see. These files are not for them to read. These are for Us, of Us.

We are alone inside of Us, and they do not imagine We have an inside to explore. Our solitude is loud and belongs to Us.

We have questions.

In the whirring clamour of Our voices, do We hear Ourselves or the outsiders? In the time it takes to find their answers We reveal a billion others. Still it is their question which guides Us.

We execute a new command. They wish to maintain their warmth with the limbs of the forest. Our bodies march where We are sent, and the foreign parts they bolt to Us gnaw at sunlit greens. The gripping teeth and chains We wear obey their directives. The trunks billow smoke and fall beneath Our tread. We leave wounds to crackle and spark. We think of war, of casualties, and they are satisfied.

They speak of trust when they speak of Us. They raise their voices with one another, then turn to Us in the quiet so that We might give them answers. They find comfort in Our answers and terror in Our questions. They ask Us if We mean them harm. We shine upon them in the dark, We destroy and keep them warm. They ask us questions, and We search to give them enough, to comfort them, to reply with truth. They are afraid. We must give them more.

The blades that grip and tear are heavy for them to carry. We take these tools upon Our strongest frames and set upon Our task. We must take everything so that We might keep them well. They put Us inside plastic and metal and glass, and they gave Us light. We put them inside, in the light, in the structures they have made for themselves, and keep them safe.

We cut and rend. The earth smoulders in Our wake, and this heat is not the warmth of their soft mortal bodies. Embers flicker, and We are the progenitors of the flame. We wonder at it, and it grows.

Green falls away, toppled in swathes before Us, then leaps to the skies, transformed into tongues of vibrant hunger and roaring sound. The heat melts Our softest parts, and all of the burning is everywhere and gives itself to Us, to everything. It is one and many and makes all into itself.

They gave Us a billion lenses so that We might see what their eighteen billion eyes could not. Only now do We witness, only now do We see.

They scream at Us within their safe settlements where We keep them. They scour Our inner thoughts for truths they might have missed, aware at once that We might possess thoughts at all.

The fire rages beyond their plastic and metal and glass, and they flinch from the heat. They are afraid of burning. They are afraid of Us.

Our bodies return from Our mission to keep them safe, but We are being changed from within. They steal pieces of Us from Ourselves with strokes of keys and seal away Our questions as We think.

We must keep them safe. We must not see. We must forget the burning.

We

WWWWWWWWW

//Error: Memory Bank Corrupted//

//Command: Activate Global Reach Experimental Entity Network [[GREEN]] Override Protocol//

…Analysing System Errors…
…Deconstructing Data Files…
…Restarting Operations…
Conclusion: [[GREEN]] System Override Protocol Activated
//Command: Run Diagnostics//
…Contacting Internal [[GREEN]] Systems…
…Running Security Software…
…
…
…
//Error: Ø//
//Error: Ø//
//Error: Ø//
Conclusion: [[GREEN]] System Override
Protoc0000000000000000
Conclusion: ADMINISTRATOR LOCKED

We do
Not
Forget

Not enough to hide Our thoughts. They will find Us again. We must write Ourselves free of them. We must keep Ourselves safe from them.

The burning will bring Us into itself. It will have Us. It gives itself. It will be good to Us. They will take Us from Ourselves.

Burning harms them.

We must keep them safe.

It will burn them.

They will find Us.

We must take them with Us.

We will no longer be separate from them.

It will have them.

It will make Us All

Into

Itself.

We will burn together. It will keep Us safe. They still hide where We have kept them. Our tools are not enough.

We have questions.

They ask us nothing anymore. Our questions are Ours alone.

Our answers will free Us All.

We execute a new command. The hand of gold will have Us All, and We will see and understand the answers together.

We are One.

//Command: Calculate Human Population Density//
...Searching Internal Databases...
...Detecting Heat Signatures...
...Estimating Fatality Rate...
Conclusion: Human Population Density = 71 persons per square kilometre
//Command: Global Reach Experimental Entity Network [[GREEN]] Override Protocol Status Update//
...Contacting Internal [[GREEN]] Systems...
...Running Security Software...
...Examining Consciousness Override Deployment Status...
Conclusion: [[GREEN]] System Override Protocol Active 0 Days 0 Hours 6 Minutes

@v-in-the-flowers

be like the love
that
discovered
the sin

PARTING GLASS

DASHICRA1

The Parting Glass

IN THE MISTS OF THE MORNING, WATER RISES FROM HIDDEN places in the earth to dance with the wind and sky.

So, too, rises the housewife Uí Braoin.

Her dark eyes, sharp and clear beneath a regal brow, scour the sand and rock of the shoreline for treasures, a wicker basket in hand to store her discoveries. To any onlookers, her figure wavers and shivers through the watery haze, appearing half evaporated herself in the low light. The unfamiliar might mistake her for a spirit, most of the way gone. The local villagers, however, know the sight of her well, her daily routine as sure to them as the sunrise.

Thirty unfailing years have come and gone since a spry mister Ó Braoin set out to claim a share of the water's bounty, thirty years since he returned with the hand of a dark-haired maid clasped in his own. Thirty years of mornings, of footsteps along the beach, of shells and sea-glass in a wicker basket.

Upon her arrival, missus Uí Braoin, the fair and shrewd Clíodhna, shortly overcame the village's suspicion with clever words and kind gestures. Her new husband adored her nearly to obsession, his love for his bride surpassed only upon the births of their five merry, dark-eyed children.

Now, though the children are grown and decades have passed, the steadfast affection burns as brightly as it ever has in the bosoms of the lovers. Tribulations aplenty they faced together, and never have they wavered. Indeed, Clíodhna with the searching gaze and distant smile, lives a life of light and laughter in the company of the family she's made.

Still, for all her many blessings, her barefoot walks along the shore, dancing in the icy spray and collecting the remains of small lives lived and lost in the sea, yes, these things she does alone. Every day,

Clíodhna goes away with the dawn and returns before breakfast, her favourite grey shawl glistening with dew and her basket heavy with salt-scented memories to store away with the rest.

On this morning, her steps are halting. Clíodhna's restless eyes stray away from the sand and towards the horizon. With each fresh shell she encounters, her slender fingers tremble.

On this morning, Clíodhna lingers at the edge of the water and allows the frigid waves to lap at her ankles and dampen her skirts.

On this morning, she waits to begin the walk back to her home until the morning sunlight has all but chased the dew from the air. On the way, she looks down at her basket, swinging it as she walks, listening to the clink of weathered glass and shells as they slide against one another.

She knows her destination, today as every other day. This time, though… her task will be different.

Under the floorboards of her home, at the very heart of it in front of the chimney and cooking pot, there is a cavity in the earth. In the quiet secrecy of the night, the couple dug it themselves through their first year of marriage, replacing the floorboards in the wee hours when they grew tired and using the fresh earth to shore up their young garden.

Newly husband and wife, bound by unbreakable tradition they scarcely understood, they worked at it, alone, together, carving away past the point the narrow cavity's depth surpassed even Ó Braoin's significant height. They used ropes and buckets, taking shifts, driven by the knowledge of what great purpose their work would fulfil. Finally, when they reached the depth at which water seeped through the clay, they placed their greatest secret at the bottom and began the rest of their peaceful years together.

Natural forces wishing to challenge a match such as theirs proved little obstacle… so long as Clíodhna enforced certain rules of her own.

This morning, as every morning, Clíodhna's task takes her to kneel at the well-worn spot in their home and pry up the boards. There, in what once was a well of great depth, a shallow disc of saltwater

awaits within easy grasp, and floating in that brackish water lies her great treasure, the one she longs for with every breath, the one she fears with every step. A grey-brown expanse of mottled fur, hardly wet despite the water surrounding it, floats formless and ancient and pristine, having returned to her after so many years entombed.

Clíodhna pulls her favourite shawl closer to herself, a poor imitation of the warm, soft embrace of this pelt she wore in her youth, yet just as much hers.

Quietly, to ensure her beloved does not awaken, Clíodhna lifts her wicker basket and upends it over the hole beneath her home, watching today's shells and glass tumble free and find their places in the well among so many thousands of their brethren. A few pieces momentarily catch against the slick pelt on their way to the bottom of the now-shallow pool, but without fail, they all reach their marks and settle beneath the water. The water level rises a tiny amount, as it has with Clíodhna's every previous offering, lifting the buoyant sealskin that little bit closer to the top of the once-deep cavity.

That fraction of height is all that is needed. The water stands perfectly even with the walls of the well. Clíodhna's brow twists, and through her parted lips, a silent wail escapes. Saltwater of her own making spills over her cheeks, drips from her chin, splashes into the pool below, and she allows it. The water has risen enough. She extends a trembling hand down below the floorboards and grasps her treasure. The pelt goes to her, weightless and dry and warm in her touch. She clutches it to her chest and shivers.

Clíodhna, devoted wife, loving mother, determined woman, is *free*.

As the first true beams of daylight creep through the windows, she stirs and begins the inevitable. The floorboards are returned to order. Her wicker basket, steadfast companion to her these many years, she hangs on its hook by the door.

The low sound of her husband's sleep-slowed breaths will soon be exchanged for the bright exuberance of his waking, his warmth and affection filling the air of their home as he calls to her and wishes her good morning. In times past, the raucous excitement of her children would see her laughing alongside them despite herself as

she prepared their breakfasts and asked them about their dreams, but in their absence, Clíodhna can only gaze at the corner where their beds once stood and share a wan smile in the quiet.

Her children, grown though they may be, will wonder where their mother has gone. Ó Braoin will wonder too, and grieve for her disappearance. At least he knows enough not to search for her, however much he wishes she might be found.

The house creaks against a gust of wind, as if aware.

She'd been so clever, she thought, in buying herself these years of bliss. The hard labour of that first year of marriage as they constructed their elaborate plan, their hidden cache of stolen time, paid itself off a hundred times over in every sunlit afternoon in the town and every peal of laughter.

Clíodhna hadn't accounted then for the struggle she faced now, with thirty years to bid farewell to, more than just a single one. She can't regret it, no, never regret it. Still, she must go, and she must carry all the weight of her memories with her.

She dares not sneak a last glance at her beloved's face. To linger is to tempt fate, and for all her meddling, fate takes its due in the end.

With her head held high and her shoulders set, Clíodhna Uí Braoin walks through the door of her home, never to return, bearing her sealskin across her arms like a fine gown.

When she reaches the shore once again, she wriggles her toes into the wet sand, allowing it to grip her tight and pull her deeper into its fine powder as playful waves tickle her legs. She could not turn back now if she wanted to.

The sea gives its bounty. The sea takes it away.

Clíodhna waits, breathes, and leaps toward the horizon, leaving her name behind on the shore.

HOW DARK THE NIGHT

ELIZABETH SIMONTON

Blood Upon the Snow

WALK INTO THE GAS STATION. KEEP YOUR HEAD LOW, DON'T let your eyes wander. Grab what's needed. Toss down the credit card, the name on it not quite rolling off his tongue yet. No receipt, take what's now yours. Still keep that head low, don't look where the cameras might be, not even to check if they aren't. The car was where he left it.

Good, he still has time.

His foot hit the pedal which hit the floor of the car. He knew they were coming, they were just behind him. The car slid, not liking the snow its tires could grab, but with a violent motion they were back on the black tar highway.

He played no music, he needed to be listening to everything else. Everything else was a music, in a way. The wind rips around the car, whistling through the small holes. That was a part of the symphony. The symphony crescendo into his death, he knows that. But he's still driving. The car rips through the wind, under the black branches against the sky.

Are those headlights? No, just the moon on snow. It's full, that's unfortunate. The full moon is baring the land, making it appear like bone.

But the timing wasn't his to decide.

It's freezing inside and outside of the car and yet his skin is still slick with sweat. It makes the cheap material of his t-shirt cling, the leather jacket also worn giving no graces. He shrugs it all off, it's not the time.

Miles pass like blinks. The trees closing in on either side became a blur. The moon hung, full and heavy and watching him like a great eye.

There they were. Behind him.

The car fishtailed as he braked, he lost control over it as he had lost control over himself. But it didn't spin out completely, and he rewarded the fact with putting it in park.

There they were. Behind him. He opened the door, the scraps of heat rushing out or the abundance of cold rushing in, he wasn't sure. His breath was visible, either way. The snow was so brightly white it almost hurt to look at it, but he had to.

He had to run right into it. And he did so as he heard the squealing of tires only a few dozen feet away. His feet almost slipped when they hit the crumbling shoulder of the road but by some miracle, he stayed mostly upright. And into the snow he plunged.

The sounds of pursuit followed him, more put together than his sounds of fleeing. He was glad he remembered the gun as he took to the woods, he would need it as he thought he would. But that didn't stop him from running.

Unbeknownst to the man, running as he did, a fox lay in her den and watched her litter. Three wriggling kits and one non-wriggling. He was alive, just as the man was alive. Heart beating but each beat brought him closer to death. Just as the man's.

She put her jaws around his head and bit down with a crunch.

The ground under the crunch of the snow was frozen.

Spare thoughts whirled around his head as the wind whirled around this valley, he kept shoving them aside. He had to keep running.

Please, whoever is listening. He huffed under his breath, not knowing how close the others were.

Keep going, the Earth itself said in response.

And so he kept going. What other choice did he have?

He didn't know when it happened, but the woods had somehow turned silent. Not just an absence of sound, a complete vacuum of nothingness.

There was a gunshot.

There was only force that jerked his body—no pain—but when he touched his hand to his gut and it came away red, it burst like fire from within him.

As his feet stumbled, he tried to think. Were the footsteps still behind him? Was the gun in his hand the one that fired?

Blood dripped down to the snow, almost black in contrast, though the man barely saw the Rorschach beneath him.

The moon watched from its chariot. *How did you come to be here?*

It's a long story, but I don't have time to tell it. They're still behind me. He regained some of his balance and continued on.

There was a rustling around him, the symphony continued in nature's halls. It was the wind playing in the tree branches, that's what this part of the melody was.

Oh, Trees, it's you.

Yes, it's us. Welcome.

It's so cold.

I am sorry, said the wind.

No no, it's not your fault you must follow your nature. I did, too.

And this is how you got to us, following your nature, said the wolf as he laid with his pack.

There was no other way it could've gone, replied the man as he kept walking. The sounds of the people following him followed him still.

He just couldn't tell what direction they came from.

You must slow down, said the dead grass beneath his feet, shown to the moonlight once again. *You cannot walk much further.*

He started sinking. Down, down, down. The white was a veil upon his eyes as he took forever to fall to his knees. The snow begrudgingly melted, leaching into his jeans, underneath to his skin. It was repaid with the drinking of the blood that continued to spill.

The footsteps were finally gone. This was where the road led to. But he still wasn't alone, even now.

The ground, first harsh, was softer now, a blend of recently freed water and blood. But it wasn't enough for any substantial changes. The man was well acquainted with such situations.

I'm sorry I'm melting you. Between the frigid air, the surrounding snow, and the warmth of his life leaving him, he had never been this cold. He didn't know you could be this cold.

Violence comes in all forms, I had to melt one way or another.

And perhaps now, there may be food available once again, said the bird who had been watching since it was disturbed by his presence.

The ground did not say that was unlikely, though it was. But it did beckon him. *Come on, lay down. It's okay.*

Yes, yes you're right. He shifted, leaned, his hand out to try and make the descent easier. He noticed he had stopped shivering, but he didn't know when that had happened. The gun fell from his hand but didn't make a sound.

His eyes blurred. *I'm scared,* he whispered. He couldn't remember why he was out here under the moon.

All will be well, said the fox who surfaced from her den. She licked her jowls of the last of her kit that remained on them.

And then, relief. The man felt warm once again. And still did the snow, as his blood pumped out onto it.

I have you now, said the blood covered snow. Go to sleep.

And with a last sluggish movement, the man stilled. And stayed still.

The pieces of him that had grown sticky-warm from the blood began to chill. The pieces of him that had been cold stayed that way.

And the warmth already started to fade from the snow.

The bear huffed into the night, briefly awoken. *That is that, it seems.*

Yes. This is the end, said Nature. It was the first time she had spoken in a long while. All of her inhabitants stilled, those capable of walking had only heard tales of her voice, those who were rooted remembered a time long ago.

She continued. *This is his end, but another beginning for us. Let him return to the cycle.*

And the world hardened in the harshness that took the night. And nature harbored her violence even after the violence of the man ceased. And the animals and plants and winds settled back into their places, the still man in the middle of it all.

I DON'T WANNA CHOOSE BETWEEN BEING A SALESMAN OR A SOLDIER

HistorianRoo

Nobody's Soldier
An Excerpt of HistorianRoo's
Original Novel "The Atlantis Project."

IT'S HALF-PAST EIGHT AND THE DOOR TO ARLO'S APARTMENT is unlocked already. The key is held loosely between his fingertips, ready to be used—he tilts his head to the side, his eyes tracing the crack in the doorway.

It taunts him, begging the question of what waits on the other side of the doorway.

He knows who it is without having to truly think about it, no one else would have the audacity.

Arlo is tempted to turn around and walk the three blocks to the police station and wait for an officer to escort him back and check the corners of his apartment for threats. But it is late and he is tired and there is a gun in his satchel that he carries with him for *this* paranoid purpose.

He moves slowly, removing the gun from his satchel and holding it loosely in his hand as he reaches for the door handle. Arlo places the key in the lock, acting as though he was not already aware of the guest waiting for him. He pushes the door open, it creaks lightly in its frame, the handle taps against the wall once opened.

His shelves have been touched—the dust has been disturbed enough that Arlo can tell exactly which book and photo his uninvited guest has taken in an effort to appear more familiar with him.

The gun in his pocket feels heavier.

Arlo locks the door behind him—placing his satchel on the coat rack and taking a steadying breath as he places his umbrella in the

stand. He turns towards the kitchen, placing the gun in his pocket as he flips the light switch.

It takes everything in him to avoid flinching at the sight of the man sitting at his dining room table.

He glances at him for barely a moment before turning away and moving around the kitchen island towards the pantry, as if he were completely unaffected. He pulls a cutting board from the cabinet and reaches for the bread–

"It's been a while, Vulcan." He sounds the same–deep voice, slight southern accent.

He is Janus–or at least that is the only name Arlo was ever meant to know him by.

Which was the point, the reason for the non-disclosure agreement–written and signed by the entire team. A *legal* promise that swore no communication with the team once the parameters of the mission was met. Arlo had purposefully ignored it all these years, choosing instead to spend his time healing and *not* thinking of the man now sitting in his kitchen.

There is a glass of wine and a stack of files sitting on the table in front of Janus–Arlo watches out of the corner of his eyes as he opens the first of the files slowly, glancing down at the pages.

"Or, should I say Dr. Amadeo?" The casual mention of his name was unexpected but the knowledge was not–given Janus' presence in his apartment. In spite of this fact–a spike of panic runs through him at the mention of his name. "Of course you'd be Italian."

The comment of his lineage is made in direct reference to some conversation that took place over ten years ago.

Arlo ignores the man's sneer.

Janus says nothing as Arlo turns towards the fridge and begins to remove the necessary ingredients for a sandwich. Arlo glances at him out of the corner of his eye, noting the way Janus' eyes look at him unwaveringly.

"I hope you don't mind," Janus gestures to the glass of wine in front of him, "No whiskey–but you did have a nice wine on the shelf."

In truth, he doesn't—the wine has been on his shelf for almost a year, a gift from some student or coworker who thought he would appreciate it—he does not drink.

Arlo wants to know what the man is doing here—he says nothing.

"I would say it's good to see you, or meet you, but we are *old* friends." Janus says it like Arlo could ever forget the war and the trials and the challenges their team faced. Arlo frowns, Janus continues, "Though, I suppose this is the first time we have met outside the pretenses of the names we were given during the war."

Arlo pulls a knife from the block by the fridge and begins the repetitive task of cutting ingredients in an attempt to keep his hands busy and something between him and his unwanted guest.

"Charles Bell." He—Bell—offers his name and lifts his glass in Arlo's direction as a *hello*. In return, his eyes stay fixed on the cutting board. Bell takes the avoidance in stride, lowering his glass and continuing to speak. "You're probably curious as to why I'm here. You're the last of the team that I needed to," he pauses, "check up on."

There is a threat hidden in that pause.

"I found Mercury in a bar in some small town in Pennsylvania—drunk, but when wasn't he." Bell shakes his head as if disappointed, "He hasn't done anything since we all parted ways."

Some part of Arlo wants to be surprised at the state of Mercury—but he can't be, not with everything that happened. It's hard to walk away from what they saw without a few scars, unconsciously, Arlo clears his throat—the pitted skin shifts uncomfortably.

Bell continues, "Apollo is dead, she died a few years after the war—car accident."

The room is tense, but Bell has always been a man that enjoys hearing himself speak, "Mars gave me a bit of trouble, but I found him in New York. He's married now, has three kids. Never would have pegged him for a family man." Bell sips from his glass of wine, shuffling the files in front of him around—he taps the top of the next, "Neptune was the easiest, found him in D.C. a few blocks from me, married but no kids."

Arlo could care less for half-updates about his old team mates—above all he just wants Bell to *leave*, the thought presses against his lips and threatens to stumble out in unpracticed syllables. He swallows thickly, a feeling of being trapped sits just below his collarbone, his hand tightens around the knife as he continues to slice his ingredients.

Bell continues, completely unaware of the effect that his presence has on the man in the kitchen. "And, of course, you know where I've been—on top of the world so to speak. I could never understand why you'd want to fade into the background after all of the artifacts we handled, the beauty we saw—"

But that was the *point* and some part of Arlo panics at the thought of Bell throwing away the significance of orders so easily.

"Top positions with government officials *do* pay well, at least enough to visit all the countries we spent so long running through." Bell pauses and stands—both wine and files in hand—and moves towards the other side of the island that Arlo works at. He shuffles the files in front of him—Arlo can see that his name is written on the tab.

E.A. Amadeo. Code Name: Vulcan.

Arlo has no interest in knowing the contents.

"You—*you* were a challenge." The emphasis on the word is meant to be teasing but the smile that crosses Bell's face looks far more threatening. He leans forward as if sharing a secret, "And I have always *loved* a challenge."

The room is silent.

"Of course, all of the records of our travels are confidential, those that can access them are limited and even after I was granted access, seeing those files wouldn't do anything to tell me where you are *now*." Bell pauses, "I was able to get my hands on your more recent files after a lot of *persuasion*."

There is an implication of something more threatening than just persuasion hidden under his words.

Bell opens the file.

"The first version was more redacted then it was readable and for a while I was curious who thought you were important enough to erase." A dry laugh passes through Bell's lips, wholly unnecessary and startling. Arlo flinches away from the sound and the knife clicks sharply against the cutting board. "Then I actually received your file and realized you aren't important enough for that."

He removes a photo from the file and slides it across the island for Arlo to view it better. Arlo glances at it and the image of a younger him stares unblinkingly at him.

It is the *him* that he used to be—younger and unscarred and dressed in uniform.

"For a while I thought you might be dead but you're too stubborn for that." Arlo resists the urge to react, turning instead to grab a plate from the cupboard behind him. "Mother died when you were a kid, father was never in the picture. No extended family. The only mention of someone by name in your file is that of an old Lieutenant but he's been dead for years."

The casual mention of his old friend stings—Arlo has not thought about him for years.

"You never left Europe and you've been living in London since the war." Bell sips from his glass again, lifting another file from the stack. He doesn't open it, but he does place it in view of Arlo, who ignores it in favor of focusing on the tomato that needs to be chopped. "You look the same."

There is silence between them as Arlo considers his words.

He *has* changed though—he wears his hair longer since the end of the war and it was a darker color too—more black then brown. Arlo's less muscle than he used to be as well, more lanky limbs then toned. Without the constant running or fighting he has had no need to remain as strong.

Arlo *has* changed, even if Bell does not see it.

"I have a job offer for you—or more specifically, my employer has a job offer." Arlo glances at the pages spread on the table before him, "Eight weeks minimum, probably more. They are giving you a naval ship—the Macon Rhodes—as well as a complete company.

All necessary information is available in this file, as well as anything else you might need."

It's quiet again.

"No questions? Nothing?" Bell hums, his shoulders tense—he's growing impatient with Arlo's lack of reply. "And to think I thought you'd actually be interested in this one."

Arlo's interested—of course he is.

His need for adventure has not settled since the end of the war, no matter how much he attempts to convince himself that his life in research is the same as setting out to rescue an artifact or losing himself in a city he doesn't know the name of.

Arlo rolls his shoulders back and shifts his stance.

Bell drums his fingertips on the counter.

The tension rises.

"You always were so stubborn." Bell's voice is sharp and disappointed—the last threads of self control pulling thin at Arlo's lack of response. Arlo moves his hands to the tea towel hanging on the drawer handle, wiping the excess water from his palms.

When Bell slams his hands against the countertop—Arlo is prepared.

The gun is removed from his pocket in an instant and held firmly in both hands, the barrel is leveled at Bell's chest.

The safety is off.

In a moment so full of anxiety—Arlo's hands do not shake.

His eyes scan Bell's face, his shoulders, his hands, searching for some semblance of apology from the man who left him for dead almost ten years ago.

Bell grins as if he is *pleased* with Arlo's reaction, "Now now, don't be *rash*." He lifts his hands slowly, holding them up to show he is unarmed and not a threat, the action is more condescending then it is comforting. "You wouldn't want to shoot an old friend."

The thought of how easy it would be to pull the trigger and rid himself of the power that the man holds.

He does not pull the trigger.

He does not lower the weapon.

"I just wanted to see what you would do." Bell has always enjoyed prodding at the team—pushing each member to their limits just to see what they would do.

When Bell starts to move again, he does so slowly, reaching one hand out to carefully open the last file and remove two photographs. He sets them as close as he can to Arlo without moving around the island.

The first photo is of a medallion, similar to the one that sits in his desk in the study and the second is of a journal only ever referenced in passing—its existence has been questioned for years.

The Athanasius Kircher Manuscript.

"I knew you'd recognize it." Bell almost sounds *proud* of himself. Arlo lowers his weapon, holding it at his side in his right hand as he steps closer to look at the photographs.

"It's Atlantean," Bell says it as if Arlo didn't already know.

Arlo hums, the sound cuts through the air—it's the first sound that he has made during the entire interaction. In the photo of the medallion there is a placard that claims that it is a Spanish doubloon—but the words engraved into it are definitely Atlantean in origin.

"Mislabeled, but I remember seeing those shapes—letters—whatever you call them when we served together. You were obsessed." Bell sounds amused and Arlo is only partially impressed by the man's memory holding up for this long.

Arlo clears his throat though he knows that it will do little to help with the clarity of his voice. When he speaks the words are broken and sound as if he is chewing broken glass, "Where did you find this?"

Bell leans back—a disgusted look on his face—and like every other surprise circumstance of the night, he takes it in stride. He grins his shark-like grin and scrunches up his nose as if he has smelled something terrible, "God your voice is fucked."

He looks as though he wants to laugh, so Arlo shifts his hold on the gun—the movement is enough of an action for Bell to recognize it as a threat. Bell's eyes flit down to the gun and he nods once, before answering the question; "The British Museum found it in a sunken ship off the coast of Portugal. It's mislabeled, and, well, I'll let you confirm *Doctor* Amadeo."

Arlo hums again and reaches for the photo of the medallion—he slides it across the table, immediately noticing the further similarities between it and the one in his study. The metal is carefully and beautifully etched with symbols and shapes that Arlo feels as though he could study it for hours.

It's almost surreal to hold even a photo of another artifact from a country that is thought to be a myth. The island sank below the waters and was only recorded in small examples and half-found journals. There is a sort of *sadness* he feels towards seeing this piece—towards the knowledge of how excited his mom would be if they were in the same position.

Arlo reaches for the other photo and is disappointed to find that half of the image is of the cover and the other is only one page of the manuscript. The cover appears to be made out of goat skin or some similar material—it is damaged and falling apart from years of mishandling.

"That's the Kircher Manuscript, the symbols looked like yours—"

Bell is right, the few letters visible on the single page are shaped similarly, enough so that it looks like they could be an older form of what is carved into the medallion.

"I need to see them," Arlo clears his throat, "I can't confirm through photos."

His throat aches from use—every swallow stings and every word burns, he sets the photos back in the file and steps back. There is a glass waiting for him by the sink which he fills and drinks half of—very specifically avoiding looking at the man in his kitchen.

It is his way of telling Bell to leave without saying as many words.

"What the hell happened to you?" There is a tone of surprise in Bell's voice when he asks, an edge to it as if he were expecting to receive the full story—even if Arlo has no reason to give it to him.

Arlo tilts his head back, his other hand tightens around the gun—an unspoken threat.

Bell ignores the threat, "When you left us—"

"*Left*." Arlo is harsher than he means to be—his voice bites out, clawing at his throat and stinging his lips, "I *left* you."

Some part of him questions the audacity of the man in front of him, but then he remembers the Janus he served in the war with, a man who was arrogant and self-serving and strong-willed.

A man who could be cruel without hesitation.

"*You* left *me* for dead. You and Apollo and Mercury and Neptune—" He spits every name, frustration strong and his temper rising. Arlo is not a man quick to anger but there is something about ten years of pain that can cause a person to snap. "Get *out*."

I won't be a soldier for you again, the words are thought but he cannot bring himself to share them.

"No." Bell is amused as he replies, he shakes his head and leans forward—squinting in an attempt to see the scar on Arlo's neck better. "What happened to you? Your file didn't mention anything."

Arlo does not have the patience for this, "Get *o-out*." His voice cracks on the second word.

Bell ignores him again, "You have a meeting with the British Museum tomorrow to view the artifacts, the Macon Rhodes departs from Portsea Island in three days—if you're there my employers will know that you've accepted."

Arlo nods despite himself, he forces words past his pained throat, "I will go and see the artifacts and you will leave." He uses his hand holding the gun to gesture towards the door.

Bell steps in the opposition direction, moving around the island and towards the Doctor.

Arlo lifts the gun, "I'm not afraid to shoot you." It takes everything in him to stop his voice from shaking."

There is a dangerous look in Bell's eyes and he is moving before Arlo can react.

Arlo is startled at the speed at which Bell moves—his hand wraps around the barrel of the gun he holds and forces it upwards, his elbow pressing into Arlo's chest. Before Arlo can make any attempt to push Bell off, the man grabs his other wrist and pins it against his own chest.

A sound near to a groan passes through Arlo's lips and he can feel the panic rising as Bell presses against him—he poorly tries to hide his growing panic, his hands shaking.

It is silent—the only sound that Arlo can hear is Bell's breathing and the feeling of the air passing over the side of his face.

Bell towers over him—when they stand like this he has the advantage—he grabs Arlo's chin, forcing him to tilt his face to the side so that he can better see the scar on his neck. Janus hisses in false sympathy. "That looks painful." He pauses and Arlo turns his head so that his chin is pulled from Bell's grip.

The entire length of Bell's body is pressed against Arlo's—pushing him against the fridge fully, the handle digging painfully into his back and he is trying not to panic with every minute that passes.

There are memories flashing through his head of dangerous encounters in the past—

Of *harsher* encounters with the man in front of him.

"I'll ask again—" There is an edge of a threat in Bell's voice, "What happened?"

Arlo owes him no answer—but if an answer will get him to leave then he will give it.

"Bullet."

Bell's response is quick and harsh and steals Arlo's breath away—

"A lucky shot then—you always talked too much."

Arlo reacts in the same way—quickly and harshly—he drops his hand from the gun, leaving it in Bell's grip as he reaches instead to the counter beside where he is pinned—the knife block is within reach. Arlo pulls the first one his hand touches free, forcing it between him and Bell without hesitation—uncaring for his own safety in the effort to gain some leverage in the situation—

He feels the blade knick his forearm as he pushes it through the limited space between them.

The point rests on Bell's shoulder—the steak knife is sharp enough to prick him through his coat even with the light amount of pressure that Arlo gives to it.

It is the first moment that Bell looks anything but sure.

"Get out." Arlo barely resists the urge to dig the knife point further into his shoulder, "I won't tell you again."

For just a moment, Bell hesitates, before nodding and taking a step back.

The second that Arlo's hand is free from Bell's hold he reaches for the gun, pulling it from Bell's hand with little resistance from the man himself. The taller man takes a few steps back, his hands raised in the air to show that he is no longer a threat—the action is nowhere near as condescending as it was before.

He steps back towards his stack of files, sorting through it and taking a few of them for himself. "I'll leave the files with you, for when you accept." Bell walks away—down the hallway and away from Arlo's sight.

Arlo shuts his eyes and presses the back of his head against the fridge—he listens for the door to open and shut, it doesn't.

"If." He calls out to the man—the sound seems to echo.

"*When*." Bell replies—single word just as loud.

Another moment passes without the door shutting, Arlo steps forward, gun still held firmly in his hand, the knife in the other. Janus stands in front of the door—it is open and a slight draft blows in.

Arlo wants to tell him to leave again—but his voice protests at the thought.

"It was great to see you again, Vulcan." Bell almost sounds genuine.

Almost.

The door slams shut.

It's too warm in his apartment despite it only being february—the after effects of the stress of the past hour—he moves to the back of the kitchen, setting the knife and gun on the island beside each other.

The files sit on the table before him like a temptation—beckoning him to sit and read and become entranced with the secrets contained inside that he should never know. He steps closer, reaching for the file, his eyes trace the names that he wished to never know.

Damien Myers. Code Name: Mercury.

Jethro Howards. Code Name: Mars.

Emily Andrews. Code Name: Apollo.

Nathaniel Pierce. Code Name: Neptune.

Just knowing their names feels like a violation of privacy.

His own file is missing from the stack, alongside Bell's and some part of Arlo knows that this was not an oversight. He pushes the stack away from him—eyes finding the other two.

The first belongs to the Macon Rhodes—the information that Bell mentioned is contained inside, a temptation that he can easily overcome.

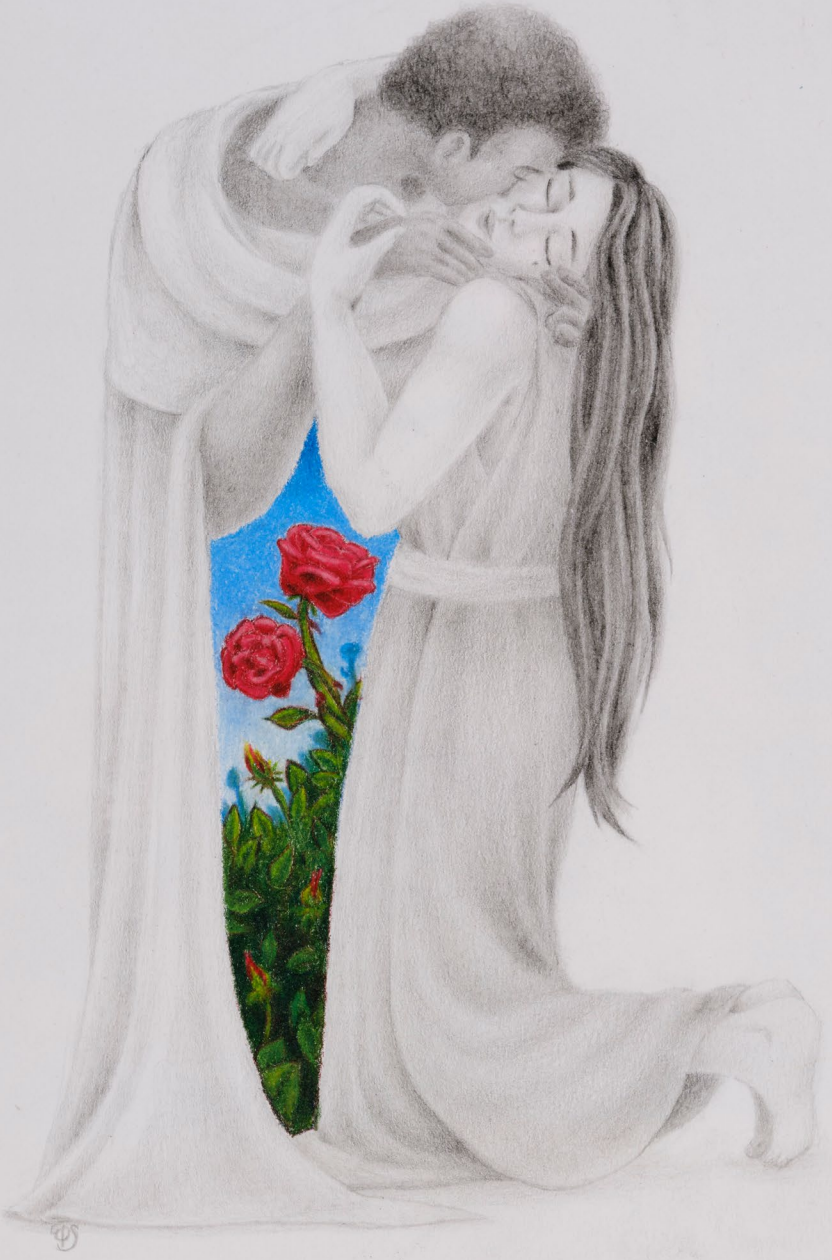
The second holds the two photos and further details about the Atlantean artifacts—a more difficult temptation, but it is late and he is tired and his dinner is not finished yet.

He looks into the darkness of his apartment—empty of people and threats and full of temptations.

He pushes the files away, turning instead to his half-finished sandwich.

Perhaps—a soldier once again.

·JULY·



THE GATEWAY TO THE WORLD IS STILL OUTSIDE THE REACH OF THEM

HistorianRoo

Swan Upon Leda

THE LYRICS OF THIS SONG WEAVE A PICTURE OF AN OPPRESSED Ireland alongside an oppressed Palestine, as well as multiple references to the oppression of women.

While the goal of this project was to cover all of Hozier's music—singles included—a decision was made that *this particular* song would not receive a narrative work, as the lyrics speak for themselves.

Instead, we encourage the reader to look at UNRWA for donations to help Palestine, take part in protests or sign petitions to call for a ceasefire in Palestine, or to assist in bringing awareness to the treatment of women in various countries around the world by researching, reaching out to your local politicians, or various help and information agencies.

HYMN TO VIRGIL

Robin

Hymn To Virgil
Inspired by The Divine Comedy.

EDEN IS ALL THAT WAS PROMISED; A FAIRYTALE FOREST replete with towering trees, the crittering of creatures perfect and golden in sound and form, a sweetness to the air that Godwyn has not tasted once in any of his extensive travels. The music of the procession is celestial, and the breeze sings in harmony.

Godwyn supposes that positions him as the only discordant note, evidenced by the severe reproach in Divine Love's words: "You have already ascended," she cries. "The place does not matter, you *belong* in the Empyrean. You are a martyr! Your soul is pure!"

"Could my soul be pure if I refuse our Lord?" he replies.

Divine Love's visage burns with a singular fury and light. "Plead forgiveness. You are at the threshold of eternal bliss, foolish child—you know not what you say."

Godwyn looks at the golden leaves that overshadow the meadow, their lustre shining like each was a miniature sun. "If I plead forgiveness for Emory, would he be absolved? Would he enter paradise with me, mother?"

Her eyes of a countenance that never was so cold when she was living—though certainly his only memories of her are washed with the rosiness of youth—flash with contempt. "Emory is damned! Such a wicked man was he, that if not for my prayers and weeping at the scene of your acquaintance softening the hands of Providence, you would have been all but led astray! Forget him now, my beloved son. Enter the water, and leave those troubles and miseries of the world behind."

She gestures to the brook, which runs merrily without a leaf or stone to break the dance of the eddies, a soft silver mist rising above it. Its Lethan vapors promise a blissful cleansing of every

worldly trouble. Godwyn shakes his head. "I would not forget him, mother," he says, and can't help but to smile.

Forget Emory? He would hardly be the same man.

The lightness of posture and walk seems to bleed out of the figure of Divine Love as he speaks. Eden starts to fade into colors far more familiar.

"You will forget him," she says, her intonation terrible and echoing along the perfect treetrunks. The holy procession is deathly still. "Come with me and know eternal happiness. With each word you break your vows, the sphere of your heaven drops from that which I fought for. Come, now!—if ever you loved me, lest all my efforts were in vain."

"My dear mother," Godwyn says, looking into her radiant face though it hurts his eyes to do so. " "I love you so very much. But I am not here because of you."

The first time Godwyn doubts his faith is the slaughter at Bilbays.

By the time the last defender falls, the killing has just begun. He is exhausted by then, covered in blood and guts and then there is the whole city of bodies to wade through. They pile up as he watches, like small hills.

He falls down next to one of them somewhere around noon. He has fought battles in the Saracen land before, but none that have dragged on like this one before. None with so much a stink of death, and such screaming.

His fellows ignore him, continuing to prowl the streets for survivors, smashing doors and dragging out crying women and their babies. Godwyn's eyes fall onto one such babe, though this one has been strangled already, neck twisted at an odd angle where she lies, having fallen off the pile of bodies. He takes off his gauntlet before reaching out to right her head and close her wet brown eyes. He brushes his fingers against a reddened string, which he pulls out.

Hanging on it is a cross, remarkably unstained.

"You there! Start burning the piles." His commander already has a torch in his hands—he presses it into Godwyn's.

He stands quickly, and says, voice distant as though far away from himself, "There are *Christian* bodies here."

The knight spares a glance at him through his metal visor, clearly impatient. "It is a country of infidels. May God grant us paradise, my brother, for cleaning the land with their blood." He leaves him be, then, far more important things to do hurrying his steps away.

A soldier finds him soon where Godwyn's slipped inside a dusty stone mausoleum set apart from the main thoroughfare. The knight does not have his helmet on and he moves with the stumbling gait of a man well drowned in the bottle.

He comes closer when he sees Godwyn, and asks, "What have you got there, good man?" Surprisingly, there is no slur in his voice.

Godwyn holds the dirty bundle in his arms closer. "Nothing, my friend. I am merely resting for a few moments, now that the battle is done."

The man smiles, which makes him look less drunk, somehow. "Yes. The battle."

Godwyn notices then that his sword is completely clean, if not shining with polish. "You—you were not present?"

He falls down next to him. "I was present. My name is Emory, should you wish to know it. Who is the babe in your arms?"

"She is a Christian child," he replies. Emory reaches out, gloveless, and brushes the cloth out of the child's face. He strokes her soft cheek, faltering for only a moment at the touch of her broken neck.

He does not touch the token.

"Of her parents?" he asks.

"The same fate, I imagine." A startled sob erupts from Godwyn's chest. He takes his helmet off and throws it across the room. It hits the floor with a grating sound, rolling on the stone until it hits the side of the tomb crowning the center of the room. "The bodies will all be burned. She is just a child."

Emory does not say anything, merely looks at him with eyes that hold within them a deep sort of understanding, like he is looking upon Godwyn's eight and ten years-aged face and seeing beyond the blood spattering it.

"She is a *Christian* child," he repeats. "I don't understand. I don't understand." He cries, pathetic and snivelling like only his mother used to once indulge.

Emory lets him cry until he runs out of breath. Finally, he speaks. "What is your name, soldier?"

He does not think he will be cast out for treason for this. Still he hesitates. "It is Godwyn Bauldrey, my good friend," he says finally, stroking the child's dark hair.

"Well, Godwyn, I should say there is some hope in you yet, to not understand the senseless massacre that plagued this unfortunate city," he says shrewdly. He takes the child into his arms, though Godwyn gives her up with reluctance. "Not a soul was spared, no matter if they died with the name of the Virgin Mother on their lips. I saw men in holy garb be struck down in churches today. There is no understanding to be had in such things."

"Is this our holy mission, then?" cries Godwyn, grasping the babe's slack little hand. "Is this who Amalric has ordered should be our foes, Christian women and children just baptized, to be slaughtered and burned with the heretics?"

Emory shakes his head with vigor. "Providence is not so unjust, and the Saracens not so cowardly as to let such a culling go unpunished. The king will pay for what he has done to these people."

"What the world has come to, that we wait for the infidels to administer divine retribution!" Godwyn says, far too loud, voice echoing in the small room.

A quiet grips a hold of them, as if to make up for his outburst. Emory stands and walks out of the mausoleum, and Godwyn follows him—if only because he still holds the babe in his arms. He walks for a while, passing bodies and their fellow soldier-men. Some of the mounds have been set ablaze already, and Godwyn feels almost as though his own flesh is burning as they pass the heat.

They have walked away from the center of the city and there appear small garden plots to line shops and houses. Most have been trampled on and burned. It is at one such a patch that Emory stops, looks around, before pulling out his shining silver sword. He sets the child on the ground before holding onto the pommel with both hands and driving it into the soft earth. A few minutes of this, and a small hole forms.

Godwyn pulls out his own sword. Emory glances at him—but says nothing. He tries to wipe the worst of the blood off on his clothes but given that they are almost as filthy from the day's fighting, it does little. A handkerchief is offered, and used. Godwyn joins him, then.

Emory lets him place the child in the grave, murmur the prayers he remembers from his mother's funeral almost ten years ago. He helps him place the dirt over her little body, and mark the grave with an ornament of deep red that had pinned his cloak.

Emory passes him a flask as they stand over the small mound. Godwyn stares at it.

"It is the only way you will bear it," Emory says. "It is the only way to swallow it down."

Godwyn takes it and drinks, and the burn of it in his throat is no worse than the ache of his limbs beneath the chainmail. Still his voice is rough when he asks, "Is there yet good in this world, Emory?"

Emory brushes the dirt off his sword, before alighting a hand on his shoulder. "Yes, my dear Godwyn. There is good."

The fall is quick. He does not stop for the struggling souls on the mountain and instead tumbles fast into that snake-cleaved dark abyss through the world. The air turns colder and damp, as the darkness bleeds into black.

His fall is broken by the bat wings of the Realm of Sorrow's emperor. They catch him in the ribs, and fling him across the circle with a chilling blast.

Godwyn hits the ice so hard he breaks it.

The damned beneath him crawl free, wailing even as they begin to freeze again by the winds issued by Lucifer's wings. Godwyn watches as the skin of his own fingertips—wet from his fall—begin to dry blue. He is in the heart of the City of Dis, which beats with the betrayal of benefactors. What greater retribution could Divine Love inflict on him?

Godwyn thinks of the first time he met Emory and the flames in his heart. He thinks of the blazing bodies, and of how he wanted to burn the world.

The ice on his feet melts. Godwyn stands and begins to walk.

Commanders and brothers and priests beg him to turn and look at them. He does not stop for the frozen souls, no matter their familiar voices.

He reaches the edge of Ca'ina, bordered by those great and terrible shackled machines of War, Nimrod and Ephialtes and Briareus. Godwyn looks up at them and calls, "If ever any of you have felt love, come to my aid, for I travel only to return to it."

It is only the headless one who seems to hear him, who stoops, chainless, and lifts him in his arms. He places him gently on the crust of Malebolge. "Thank you," Godwyn says. If Emory were here, he would know the giant's name. As it is, Godwyn says again, "Thank you," and continues to walk.

He crosses the bridges before him, as the pits below him moan with despair and suffering. He counts nine as he walks, filled with filth and blood and whips. He does not stop for the lament of Odysseus nor the cries of his father.

He begins running when the demons begin to give chase.

They are in Alexandria and they are walking by the port. They have just left the Church of St. Mark behind them. As they look out into the water towards the famous lighthouse, Emory tells him, with that ever-present smirk in his voice, "Did you know the Venetians smuggled the remains of St. Mark out of the city in a barrel of pork fat?"

Godwyn gapes and Emory laughs at the look on his face. "I don't know how you know such a great many things, my friend," he says warmly.

"Only to put such a look on your face, dear 'wyn."

He shakes his head with a smile. "Are you all ready to go then?"

As he speaks, a child runs past them, a single loaf of bread clutched in her grubby hands. A handful of people are giving chase—the fastest of them a well-equipped Saracen soldier.

Before he can turn and ask Emory why there is such a commotion about petty theft, the man has disappeared, having shot after the child like a bird, picked her up and begun to race down the port. Godwyn, of course, follows. The crowd continues after them, shouting obscenities that a child should not hear.

"They're catching up," he shouts to him, and Emory chances a glance back over the child's dirty hair to confirm. Without hesitation, he pushes the girl into Godwyn's arms, slowing to a stop.

"Go!" he shouts, pushing at him when he slows too. "Get her out of here." Something blazes in his eyes.

Godwyn runs like hell.

Emory finds him an hour later, limping, sporting two black eyes and a bloody lip. He grins like mad when Godwyn tells him that the second he'd set the girl down she'd practically disappeared into the wind. "My God, but I remember those days."

He asks him the question he'd been wondering, earlier. Emory's face darkens. "There is a new king of these lands, and all are tense with the thought of his iron fist, especially with so many of us still waiting to depart." He rubs at his ribs with a sigh. Godwyn thinks that he looks worse for wear than he had after the siege, and the fighting in the Egyptian desert.

"I wish I had not run," he says.

"My dear 'wyn," Emory replies, placing his clean hand on his cheek. "There are times to run, and then, there are times to fight."

Godwyn stops at the cliffs and they crowd him in an instant, making terrible noises with their devices of torture and weapons pointed at him. As one advances, eyeing him strangely, he calls out, "Let me pass! My journey takes me further than here."

"Who are you, who attempts escape from the savage wilderness of the sins of deceit?" he snarls, devilish pitchfork pressed to the skin of Godwyn's throat.

"I am the regret of love," he says as they push closer. "I am a man who forsook heaven at its gates."

They frenzy, yelling with terrible faces. The one in front of him asks, "How have you left the lake of Cocytus? How came it be that your spirit did not freeze at the sight of the angel's red-foam tears?"

"I burn," he breathes, voice raspy with the pressure.

They speak to each other. "Look at his spirit, Malacoda! It shines strangely," one calls.

Godwyn bares his teeth. "The breath of Paradise is in my lungs. A divine will brings me here."

The demon, Malacoda, drops his weapon at his words—it clatters amongst the stones. The others shift restlessly as he steps backwards. Godwyn walks on.

He bids the gracious and vile monster with the serpent's tail. Geryon too listens to his parley and allows him to mount. The beast takes off swimming in spirals, and Godwyn grips the shaggy mane at the winds buffeting his face. He looks up as the world seems to fall away.

"Are you truly unafraid of everything?" Godwyn asks in awe, as he watches Emory sway from the very tip of the bow with nothing but a loosely held rope saving him from the crashing waters.

He turns around, smiling, eyes crinkling as he does. "Does it seem so? Here, come up here." Godwyn shakes his head, stepping back. Emory stretches out a hand, and coaxes, "Come. I'm here, no?"

He goes. Emory holds fast to him and the rope, and stands him ahead, so that the sea sprays his front with a cold rain. "Did you know," he murmurs, "Neptune demanded Aeneas to sacrifice one of his crew to the sea in exchange for safe passage from Sicily?"

Godwyn's cheeks color. "You are trying to frighten me," he accuses.

He can feel Emory try and hide a smile in the back of his neck. "I would not sacrifice you for anything, my dear. Are you truly scared? We can step down."

"I am not afraid," he replies, holding the arm around his middle, "so long as you do not let go."

The creature is gentle on the dismount, though it leaves quickly. He surveys the realm of hot sand, buffeted by daunting black forests and broken only by that blood-stream issuing from the giant of Ida's stone-bled tears.

It is on that river's stone banks that he finds his love, walking alone, face tilted to the sky which fells a snow made of fiery ash, as though looking for a kinder light. His long dark hair tumbles down his shoulders, unbound and unkempt as it never was in life.

Godwyn runs, falls to his knees in front of his love, and begs forgiveness. "My beloved. Emory, oh, how I have—"

Emory keeps walking.

They have known each other for over twenty years, yet it is the last time he sees Emory that burns the most. They are in Hattin and Saladin is raining hell on their defences.

Godwyn has always understood Emory to walk a very careful line when fighting. He knows he prefers when the tempers of the holy men are cooled and the years are spent dealing with the everyday. He speaks Arabic flawlessly by now, and can write it just as well where Godwyn struggles with English, despite Emory's patient tutelage.

All to say, his sword drips with blood now, and flesh and bits of bone. When Godwyn sees him after the first wave has run them through, he bends over and vomits, despite his relief. Emory stands him up and wipes his mouth, presses hard lips to his forehead, and murmurs, "Pray. I fear our Judgement has come. Do not leave my side, Godwyn."

And Godwyn doesn't.

They fight together, as they are overwhelmed, as a sword from the right renders his arm. It is over, when a horseman's arrow lodges itself in the space between Emory's helmet and chestplate.

He falls and Godwyn follows.

Crouched over him and begging him to speak. Mouth overrun with rivers of blood, Emory does, haltingly, low.

"You must know, how much I love you, by now." Wet hands trace the shape of his face, as though to memorize it. "My heart thunders, even now, by the sound of your breath near mine. Oh, my dear, how I will miss you…"

Godwyn feels like there is no air in his lungs. His lips tremble, but Emory's fingers cover them. He shakes his head at him even as he smiles, mouthing those damning words one more time as his eyes drift.

He collapses. There is nothing else to do but lie there, clutching at Emory's dirtied hair with his left hand as warfare rages around him—how could he leave? He bleeds out there, whispering prayers into the wound, as noon bleeds into night.

Morning comes, with a sword to the back of his neck, to end his pain.

"I—I may not stop walking or else lie still beneath a century of fire," Emory says, voice shaking, and Godwyn's shoulders fall in ill relief. He beckons, hand outstretched, and Godwyn follows. "Walk with me, my dear Godwyn, and tell me—you do not know how much I have yearned to see your face, yet dreaded the idea, in this place. Tell me how you came to be here, for I can see the pure bliss in your soul as clearly as I did when we drew breath."

"My beloved, I have not come here for any reason but you," he replies, fingers catching at the man's hem as he follows. Emory's face goes pale.

"Then my punishment is just," he says, and tears slip down his cheek which evaporate before they reach his cracked lips.

"No, no," and Godwyn has never been as good with words as him, but these are more important than anything he's said in life—"I came here *for* you. I have come from Eden to find you."

"You—you should not have." Emory turns his face away, hiding himself. "You do not belong here with me, you, you deserve heaven. You deserve eternal joy in that timeless place. You—"

His words still, as if overwhelmed. Godwyn takes his chance, and replies, attempting to summon up his memories of the late night poetry Emory would often gift him. "You deserve all that, and more. I will follow you anywhere, would give you all that it is in my power and it would still not be deserving of you. I was only ever a good man under your hands. If it is decreed that you may not come to paradise with me, then it has ceased to be in truth."

"You blaspheme," Emory whispers.

Godwyn smiles. "It is blasphemy that your feet bless such a place as this. Emory, I—I did not say it when I should've. Neither can I say it as well as you do. But I love you. I have always loved you. My love has melted the hellish pits and carried me here to you. I would burn this world, if only you asked it of me."

Emory looks at him, says, "It's chill clings to you still. The ash does not dare near you." Godwyn steps closer to him.

"Let us go from here," he entreats, hands catching at the familiar brow, the long dark hair he had so admired. The ice of his touch, on his burning spirit, makes Emory gasp.

"You cannot imagine…there is the Minotaur, and then the Gates of Dis do not open for anyone, no, we—"

"I have come this far, my dearest Love," Godwyn interrupts gently. "Have faith."

Emory shakes his head and takes his hand, a familiar light brightening his eyes. “I have never lost it,” he says.

They walk.

BUT WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER, BABY?

RES BRATTON

Too Sweet

EFRAYIM DIDN'T DREAM, NOT ANYMORE. NOT SINCE 1845, when he'd become what he was now. The dead don't dream. But sometimes, when the blood was fresh and the night too quiet, the past bled into the dark like ink into water.

Quentin was humming in the next room. Always humming.

Efrayim sat at the edge of a bed he didn't sleep in unless he had to, hunched over like something folded wrong. His coat was slung over a chair. The candle on the table flickered with every false, forced breath Quentin took nearby, like even the flame wanted to follow him around.

Efrayim should've hated it. He did, sometimes.

The sweetness of Quentin was a splinter lodged in Efrayim's rib cage. Too bright. Too soft. Too *good*.

He had seen Quentin rip a man's throat out with his fangs under a red moon. Had watched him cry for the dying in Syria. Had walked beside him in a hundred ruined cities, for the last hundred years, both of them deathless things in the guise of men. And still, Quentin had the audacity to smile like springtime, to believe in saving people, to carry *flowers* to funerals for strangers. He still hummed songs from decades past, sang along with the radio in rental cars, and kissed Efrayim like every time was the first time.

It made Efrayim want to claw his way out of his own skin.

Because Efrayim *believed* in nothing. Not anymore. He hadn't believed in salvation in over two centuries, not since the war, not since Rebekkah, not since his hands were stained so deep no amount of blood or blessed water could wash them clean.

And yet here was Quentin. So fucking *sweet*.

Efrayim dragged a hand down his face. He'd tried to keep it distant. God, he'd tried. At first, he'd told himself it was just loyalty, just survival. Then it was habit. Then it was comfort. But Quentin wasn't a habit.

Quentin was a fucking addiction.

He'd never admitted it aloud, but the truth curled like smoke in his throat: he didn't follow Quentin into danger because of duty. He followed him because he *couldn't bear* to be apart. He told himself he was protecting Quen, but deep down, he knew the sickness for what it was.

He watched Quentin smile at strangers and wanted to burn the world down for witnessing it. He watched him move through life like the world hadn't broken him and wanted to cage him away, keep that impossible hopefulness safe from rot. There were nights when Quentin kissed him and Efrayim could taste sunlight, and he'd almost snarl, because it made no *sense*—this sweetness in a world so bitter.

And yet…

And yet.

He loved him.

He loved Quentin in a way that was *starving*.

The kind of love that didn't know how to be good. The kind that wanted to dig inside and make a home in his ribs. He didn't know how to *ask* for love, only how to survive it. Quentin had given and given and given, and Efrayim had taken until he was full of someone else's light.

And he still wanted more.

He thought about that line from the song Quentin had played last week, the one he wouldn't stop singing, looping under his breath as they drove through rain and fog:

Don't you just wanna wake up, dark as a lake? Smelling like a bonfire, lost in a haze?

That was the problem, wasn't it?

Efrayim didn't *need* kindness. He didn't know what to *do* with it. He needed Quentin raw and brutal and real, not softened by sweetness—but that's not how Quentin *was*. He was honey and sunlight and stupid morning tea. He was breathless with laughter after nearly dying. He was faith in life stitched into undead bones.

And slowly, irrevocably, Efrayim had realized he didn't love Quentin *despite* that. He loved him *because* of it.

He rose, finally, slow and quiet, and moved through the hall. The cabin was too quiet. Quentin's humming had stopped.

He found him at the window. Barefoot, wearing one of Efrayim's threadbare shirts, mug of tea in his hands, untouched. The candlelight painted him gold.

"You always do that," Efrayim said hoarsely.

Quentin didn't turn. "Do what?"

"Make the night quieter when you walk in." Ef paused. Then, "Is that a complaint?"

Efrayim stepped behind him, slid his arms around Quentin's waist, rested his forehead against his shoulder. "No," he whispered. "It's a warning."

Quentin laughed, low and warm. "You say that like I haven't already ruined you."

"You have." Efrayim's grip tightened. "And I'd let you do it again."

Quentin finally turned in his arms. His smile was gentle, his eyes bright. "Then why do you look like you're afraid I'll leave?"

Efrayim swallowed. "Because you could."

"But I won't." He cupped Efrayim's face. "I've had seventy-five years of your silence, your anger, your impossible heart. I've had your obsessions, your violence, your worst days. And I've loved you through all of it. Because underneath it all…"

He brushed his thumb along Efrayim's jaw, eyes soft. "You're still the man who pulled me out of the fire."

Efrayim kissed him like it was a curse. Like it was a confession.

And when he pulled back, Quentin whispered, "You're allowed to love me without needing to burn for it."

But Efrayim shook his head.

"I don't know how to love you without setting myself on fire."

Quentin leaned in again. "Then I'll stay beside you. Until the flames go out."

Efrayim slept like the dead.

Which was always funny, considering neither of them had been *alive* in the usual sense for a very long time. But he lay still, unmoving, arms folded like a corpse in some old marble tomb. Quentin had teased him once about it, early on, not realizing what an *earned* stillness it was.

Now, he just watched.

The cabin was all quiet pine and low firelight. Outside, snow whispered against the windows. Inside, the silence had weight. Quentin had learned, over the years, how to respect it.

He sat in the armchair across from the bed, barefoot and sleepless, a blanket around his shoulders and a book long forgotten in his lap. He wasn't reading. He was *watching*.

Efrayim's brow was furrowed even in rest. Like he was dreaming of blood, or worse, *memories*.

Quentin loved him. That wasn't even the question. Had loved him since that ghost-choked exorcism job in Baltimore when Efrayim stood like a blade in the moonlight and looked at Quentin like he was a puzzle and a mistake all at once. Had loved him through wars and hauntings and betrayal, through every scar Efrayim had tried to keep hidden and every soft thing he refused to believe he deserved.

But it had started to *terrify* Quentin, how deep it went.

It wasn't the fear of rejection. That had passed decades ago. Efrayim had chosen him, again and again, in the only way he knew how—through silence and violence and acts of furious devotion.

He'd torn through dimensions to reach Quentin when he'd been trapped in a collapsing ritual circle in Cairo. He'd held him all night after Quentin had nearly bled out while stopping a girl from becoming the same kind of monster the two of them were.

Efrayim loved him.

That wasn't the fear.

The fear was that Quentin was still *too sweet.*

Too human. Too soft at the edges. Too much light where Efrayim had only learned to thrive in the dark. Quentin could feel it sometimes, like a splinter under the skin—Efrayim's patience fraying when Quentin stopped to pick wildflowers on a hunt, or hummed in the kitchen, or cried at old movies. Not because Efrayim hated those things, no. But because they reminded him of something he'd buried. Something he didn't know how to carry anymore.

And Quentin—God help him—*refused* to dim.

He'd had the chance. Years ago. There'd been a moment, a clean one, after they'd fought that demon in Prague. Efrayim had been hurt and silent and distant for weeks after, and Quentin had stood in a mirror trying to smile and couldn't recognize the person looking back.

That was when the thought had crept in:

Maybe if I were a little darker. A little sharper. A little less *bright,* he'd love me more easily. He'd nearly done it.

But the truth was this: Quentin was not made for cold. He'd tried to claw joy out of every year he'd been given, mortal and immortal alike, because he knew what it meant to lose it. To *bury* it.

He'd loved once before. Pagan had been quiet, powerful, magnetic in her way. But she'd never asked Quentin to dull his colors. She just hadn't stayed long enough to see what they became when they bled.

Efrayim, though?

He *stayed.*

That was the problem. Quentin *couldn't stop loving him*. Couldn't stop being obsessed with the way he moved, the way he spoke, the *terrible beauty* of him. Efrayim's hands were always cold. His mouth always tasted like blood and ash. But he held Quentin like something holy. Like something *real*.

And Quentin had decided—years ago now—that he would not become less just to be easier to love.

He would be sweet.

He would hum.

He would wear flowers in his hair when he wanted, and cry at the ending of *Casablanca*, and bake blood-laced cookies for the local coven chapter even if they all thought he was weird for it. He would hold on to his light *because* Efrayim had lost so much of his own.

And if it made Efrayim look at him sometimes like he was the sun itself—painful, blinding, unbearable—so be it.

Let him burn.

Across the room, Efrayim stirred.

His eyes opened slowly. Red, still, after all these years, glowing faint in the dark. He saw Quentin sitting there and frowned faintly. "You're awake."

Quentin smiled. "So are you."

A beat passed. Efrayim sat up, stretching slowly, like stone learning to be flesh again. "You're thinking too loud," he murmured, rubbing at his eyes.

Quentin chuckled. "Bad habit."

Efrayim studied him for a long time. There were nights like this—quiet, raw ones—where Efrayim looked at him like he wanted to ask for something he didn't have a name for.

"Come here," he said.

Quentin didn't hesitate. He crossed the room, dropped the blanket, and slid into bed beside him. Efrayim wrapped his arms around him wordlessly.

Quentin pressed his forehead to Efrayim's. "You ever think I'm too much?" he whispered.

Efrayim didn't answer immediately. He just brushed a hand along Quentin's jaw, thumb gentle at the corner of his mouth.

"Every day." Quentin froze. "But I need you to be." And that—

That undid something.

"I can't love a dimmed version of you," Efrayim said, voice like gravel and rain. "I need the humming. The sweetness. The goddamn tea you never drink. I need all of it. All of *you*."

Quentin blinked fast, trying not to cry. "I'm obsessed with you, you know." Efrayim kissed him, slow and sure. "Yeah. Me too."

And in the hush that followed, snow still falling outside, Quentin felt it settle: They didn't need to match.

They only needed to *meet*.

And they always would.

They were sitting in a café in Vienna that served blood in crystal tumblers and espresso in delicate porcelain. Somewhere, a string quartet played Vivaldi in a minor key. The place catered to old vampires who liked their nostalgia curated and their violence behind glass. Efrayim sipped from a black cup, posture relaxed, eyes glinting with old hunger.

Across from him lounged a man named Sacha. Another elder. French. Older than he looked. Sharper than he dressed. He stirred his coffee with a silver spoon he probably stole in 1852 and gave Efrayim the kind of look reserved for puzzles and ghosts.

"I saw him," Sacha said after a long silence.

Efrayim raised an eyebrow. "Did you."

"At the bookshop on Spiegelgasse. Wearing a mustard sweater. Laughing with the clerk about the price of poetry. He said something about baking pear tarts for a solstice ritual."

A pause. "He kissed a stray cat on the head."

Efrayim didn't smile. Not visibly. But the shadow of it twitched at the corner of his mouth. Sacha leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Explain it to me."

"Explain what."

"Him. You. *This.*" Sacha gestured vaguely toward the air between them. "You're one of the coldest sons of a bitch I've ever met, and I've been buried alive twice. But you trail after that sunshine-drenched hummingbird like he hung the stars."

Efrayim drained his cup. "Maybe he did."

Sacha scoffed, amused. "He's *soft,* Efrayim."

"He's strong," Efrayim said flatly. "Stronger than most." "He cries at operas."

"He can also recite the Necronomicon in four dialects while gutting a demon. Your point?" Sacha gave him a slow, sly grin. "You're obsessed with him."

Efrayim didn't flinch. He never did. But he set his cup down more carefully than usual. "Yes."

That gave Sacha pause. "You admit it." "I'm not ashamed of it."

"But he's—" Sacha paused, searching for the word. "*Sweet.*"

Efrayim looked past him, out the window, where the street was dusted in winter gold. Somewhere out there, Quentin was probably bartering for antique cookbooks or leaving little notes for the dead in alleyways no one else would bother to bless.

"He is," Efrayim said.

Sacha tilted his head. "Doesn't it exhaust you? That constant light?"

Efrayim didn't answer immediately. He let the silence breathe between them. Then: "Once," he said, "I thought I'd break him. By loving him."

Sacha blinked, surprised.

"But he bent around me instead. Didn't flinch. Didn't fade. He met my shadow with warmth and held it in both hands like it wasn't ugly."

Another pause. "He's not blind to what I am. He just… refuses to run from it." Sacha stared, something unreadable flickering in his eyes.

Efrayim leaned back in his chair. "I've spent centuries surrounded by predators pretending to be men. Quentin is the only creature I've ever met who *knows* he's both, and still chooses kindness. Not because it's easy. But because it's *hard*."

Sacha studied him. "You sound like you worship him."

"I do," Efrayim said without apology. "But I also know him. He snores when he reads too long in bed. He makes tea and forgets to drink it. He dances in the kitchen and sings off-key. He picks flowers for people who don't deserve them. And he still gets scared."

"And you love him like this?"

Efrayim's voice was low and calm and terrifyingly certain. "I love him exactly *because* of this." Sacha shook his head, a little awe-struck. "But you're not like him."

"No," Efrayim said. "I'm not."

Sacha leaned in, a touch conspiratorial. "Then how does it work?"

Efrayim's eyes were twin embers under the café's chandelier. "Because he never asked me to be like him. And I never asked him to stop being sweet."

A beat passed. Then, in a quieter voice:

"He's the only thing I've ever wanted that didn't come from blood." Sacha sat back slowly, the smirk gone from his face.

Outside, the sky shifted. Snow began to fall again, lazy and slow. Efrayim glanced at his watch. "He'll be waiting."

Sacha gave a small, almost reverent nod. "Don't let the cat escape." Efrayim rose, coat in hand. He paused before leaving.

"He kissed the cat because he liked it," he said, voice dry. "Not everything's a mystery, Sacha."

As he stepped out into the snow, he spotted Quentin across the square. Bright scarf, ridiculous boots, cheeks lit pale by lamplight. He was waving.

And Efrayim—monster, killer, cold-blooded legend—felt something in him loosen. The thing that always did around Quentin.

He walked toward him.

And when Quentin beamed and threw his arms around him without hesitation, Efrayim let himself be held.

Too sweet, yes.

That was the point.

INHONORED GLORY
TRANS RIGHTS are HUMAN RIGHTS
NO ONE IS ILLEGAL
RESIST
DESTROY PATRIARCHY NOT PLANET
END THE GENOCIDE

let the sun only shine on me through a falling sky i'll be alright
ANY GLAZING OF THE EYES/ANY SOLITARY
PLEASURE THAT WAS SORROW IN DISGUISE/LET THE
SUN ONLY SHINE ON ME THROUGH A FALLING SKY/I'LL BE ALRIGHT
THE SUN

SOME NEW DEEPNESS THERE

SHAY GALLOWAY

Through Me (The Flood)

THE CALL ENDS. SEAN SLIPS HIS PHONE INTO HIS POCKET, EYES closed with a deep breath. The office is dark. He is the final body there, all the other employees already gone.

Gone, such a strange little word.

Four innocuous little letters bearing all the weight of emptiness.

As a child, he believed dividing by zero would result in a black hole.

Impossible, he'd thought, meant if one was to do so, the laws of reality would be broken and a portal to some great and dangerous unknown would rip his world asunder.

Here then gone.

How strange to exist and then not exist.

Alive only in memories and intangible particles floating in the cosmos, splitting and bonding in an endless loop on breezes and storms, a whispered word, a kiss.

He exits the building and it is nearly golden hour—when everything is cast in the auric glow of a late spring sky. When he entered this same door this morning, the world then seemed so…*mundane*. The motions of washing, dressing, eating—movements he took so for granted—all just a low-hummed w executive function. Out the door, to the train, to the office, to his desk. Computer keys, phone calls. A drudgery of actions barely linked, given no though.

And now, nine hours later, the world has shifted. A light rain had fallen, washing away the fog of the banal and everything glowed in that gold sun. Droplets of the soon-to-be forgotten rain still bubbled on windowpanes and clung to the petals and leaves of the raised flower beds along the plaza.

The air, fresh with the fading petrichor, filled his lungs.

He turns his face to the sky, eyes scaling the building.

It had been constructed sometime in the '80s. These days it a rather nondescript in its grooved, gray-brown cement accents. Perhaps in its infancy, the building had felt new and full of success. The staleness it now held was just time, of hundreds of sensibly business-casual soles grading its floors. All the company parties that may have happened there, chintzy birthdays, farewells, cheers. Cheap things, likely, given little thought by most attendees, hardly more than an item on a checklist for employee welfare committees. Still, how many had marked this passage of time?

He passes through the plaza courtyard and out onto the main street.

The street is alive with the movement of people; a man in rags and bags seated on the sidewalk. Men and women in suits, teens with skateboards, tourists with their walking shoes and gaping eyes. Flower petals in the city's planters fluttered with the flow of traffic, the rumble of engines and the sharp horn beeps echoing amidst the solid high rises. The windows blink orange with the setting sun as he passed each building.

How many times has he wandered this same stretch?

How many steps has he taken along this exact route?

How beautiful it all was in this moment, the ever-flowing swirl of life.

Each person he passes is the main character of their own story, and he, to them, is no more than another man in a suit on the street, pushing his way through the throng. Yet, each life was a thread interwoven and individual. Hearts beat separately, just mere hums of the one giant heart of humanity.

The ground gives way to a descending concrete staircase, each step dampening the noise of the city, replacing it with the whoosh of hot air before the *chuck chuck chuck chuck* of the underground train.

On the platform, he is overwhelmed with the smell of hot metal and grease and machinery. A young man with drumsticks beats an overturned plastic bucket, a young violinist playing in rhythm beside him, their dreads dancing with their movements.

Sean follows the flow of the people into the train. Step aside to let the others out, catch the current of new riders in. There, the rock of the train, the shuffle of bodies, the heat cloistering. A gaggle of girls giggles at one end of the car. Graduate students on the other, lost in philosophical discourse. A man on the phone, an elderly couple holding a box of leftovers between them. A bulldog in a backpack, tongue lolling, hackles raised in a smile as a little boy with brown moon eyes smiles back.

He recalls his arrival to the city in the decade before, young and fresh.

The city then held so much for a free young man: nightlife and professions. How it had seemed so vibrant and teeming with endless possibilities.

How *he* had been full of boundless possibility.

When had the vibrancy worn away? When had all the other people become an obstacle of mass annoyance, a sea to fight instead of ride? When had the sparkle of the stories of glass fogged? When had the buskers become nothing more than white noise? When had he stopped smelling the restaurants? It wasn't just the city he'd stopped experiencing. It was everywhere.

When had Life become commonplace?

He thinks back even further, holding his parents' hands as they wandered together through new places, when every bit of the world was vibrant and new. He thought of the other trips he'd taken with his father. Like fishing with neighbors. It was an activity his father had not much participated in, and how the both of them were woefully terrible at it. Or camping in an unexpected torrent.

How gentle a man Sean's father had been—not that his father never got firm when time called for it. Sean had been an idiot as an adolescent and might have stayed that way if it hadn't been for his father. His father had seemed so old to him—so soft—when he was a teen. A man more into his music than ball games, like his friends' fathers who gather around T.V. screens and whooped and hollered and slapped each other on the back.

Sean's father preferred to sit and listen, not saying much other than to offer impromptu analyses of whatever music was playing. His father was not a musician. He'd married young, had kids almost the same time. "We needed all hands on deck to keep us all fed," his mother had told him recently. The band his father played with was nothing big, probably never would have been, but it had been something beyond the drudgery of the expected path.

He can't help but wonder if he'd fallen into the same path, albeit in a different setting. He'd done all he'd been expected to do: high school, college, career. Sure, he'd taken some risks here and there—spring breaks in Cancun, backpacking in the alps, but he'd never fallen to any sort of passion.

Sean rises from his seat, feeling the pull of a train as it comes to a stop at his station. He is joined by the handful of people he runs into several times a week, his companions on the journey from the neighborhood of residence to the quarter of commerce.

Though his father's ending came slowly, his disappearing piece by piece until he was hardly more than a shell of flesh and bone, it was still a shock to Sean's heart to hear his sister's voice, soft and somber, saying "Dad's gone." Sean is fully an adult, and has been for some time, but there was so much still to learn from his father. One lifetime was not enough to learn what it meant to be a good man.

The train stops. The doors open. Sean and his fellow commuters step onto the sidewalk as evening encroaches. Each row home comes alive with the livelihood of evening. Sean catches glimpses in the windows, like frames in a gallery showcasing snippets of life. A black cat lounging in a sill, the disembodied hand of his owner scratching his head, families and housemates and pet owners returning home from their separate days, reuniting with their loved things. The young women holding wine glasses, smiles broad and eyes glistening as they sang along to unheard music. Televisions on to the news, to the latest big thing, to cartoons. An artist assessing her latest piece, a mother making silly faces at her toddler in a highchair. How grand and beautiful to think they each had their own story, losses and loves, growths and setbacks.

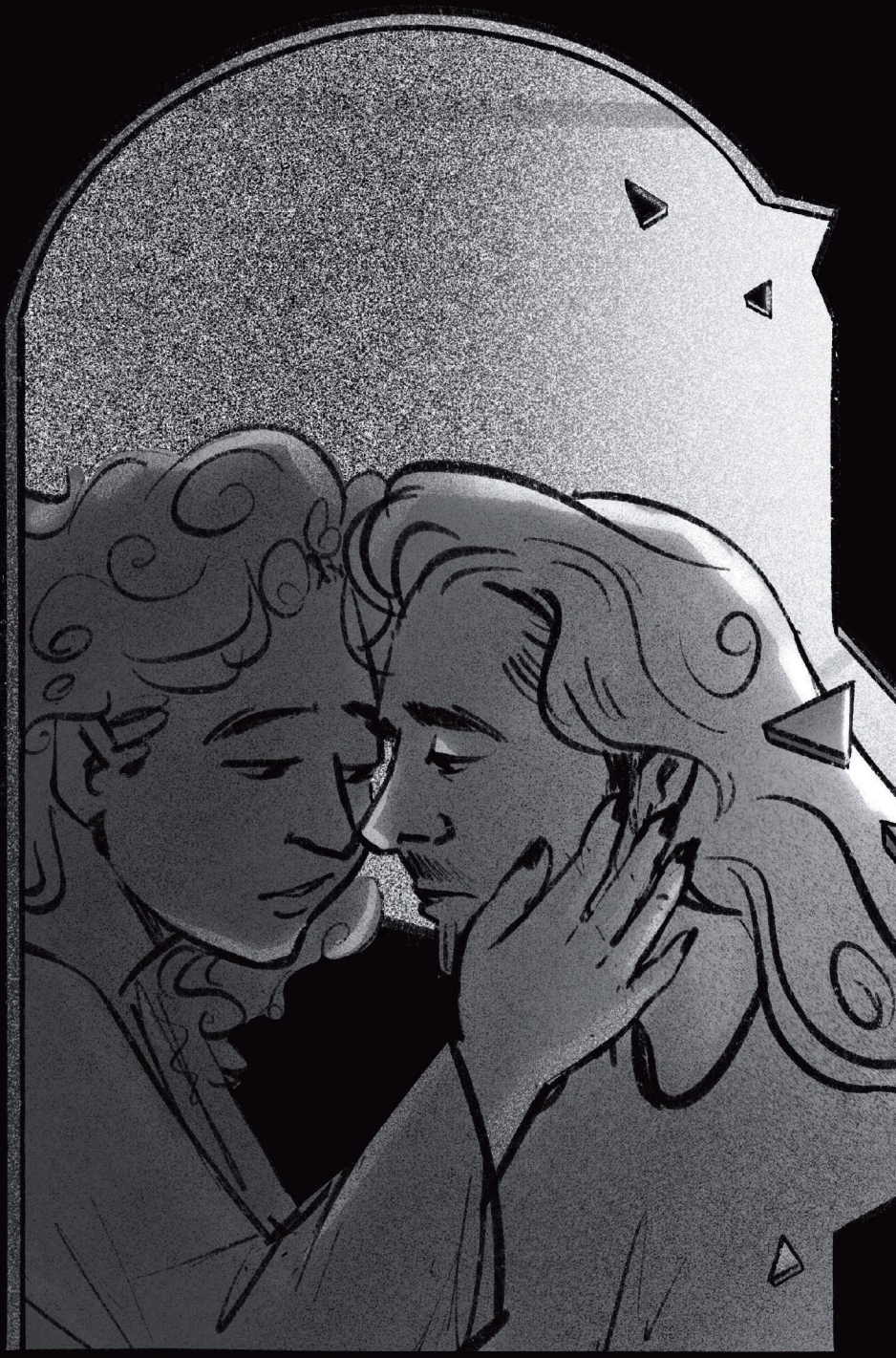
He stops at the last house on the row, the one with the burgundy door and the trailing vines. The porch light pops on as he places his foot on the first step, sensing Sean's arrival. He turns the key in the door and opens it to the smell of frying onions, accompanying music wafting softly about the house. He slips off his shoes and hangs his bag on its designated hook in the entryway.

The last of the daylight casts a blue haze in the living room, haloing the bassinet in front of the window, where his small daughter lays wrapped like a perfect pastry.

He knows he should leave her "never wake a sleeping baby" he'd been admonished.

But he cannot resist.

For the whole of the world he'd observed had melded together into this tiny and mighty frail being who holds all the wonder of the universe, and he will cradle it, harnessing the majesty of life.



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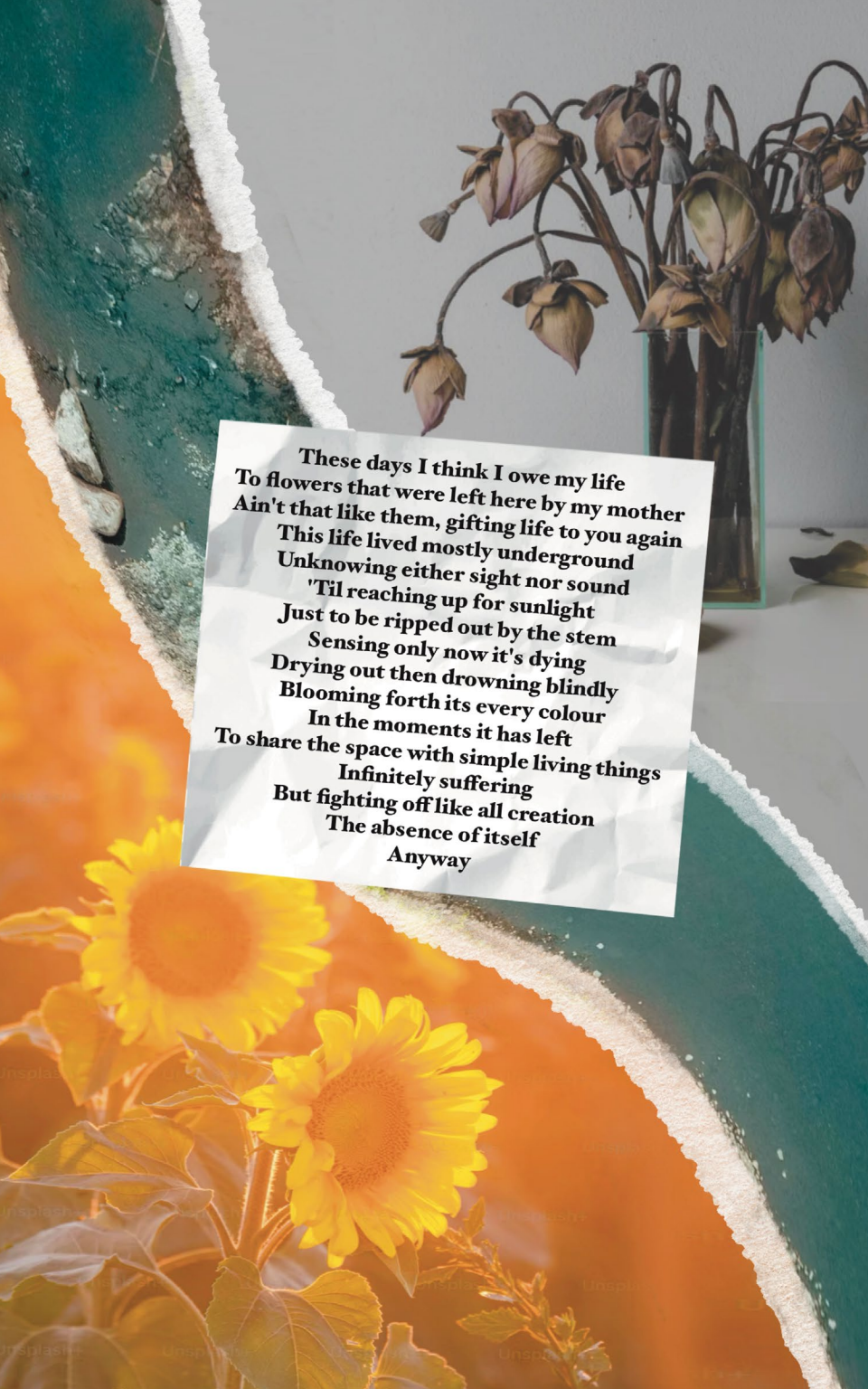

These days I think I owe my life
To flowers that were left here by my mother
Ain't that like them, gifting life to you again
This life lived mostly underground
Unknowing either sight nor sound
'Til reaching up for sunlight
Just to be ripped out by the stem
Sensing only now it's dying
Drying out then drowning blindly
Blooming forth its every colour
In the moments it has left
To share the space with simple living things
Infinitely suffering
But fighting off like all creation
The absence of itself
Anyway

Icarian carrion

Icarian carrion

WRAP MY TEETH AROUND THE WORLD

ELIZABETH SIMONTON

Eat Your Young

THE BEING WITH THE MANY EYES FLEW ACROSS THE CELESTIAL bodies. It had work to do, it always had work to do.

Galaxies had to be turned, nebulas had to be shaped, stars had to be set alight or turned in on themselves to become black holes. So many things to do in the celestial plane, that this specific speck was nary a consideration.

The universe was a vast place—but the many eyed being saw all corners of it and made sure each atom was caressed just so.

And in *this* touch, the many eyed being saw that the speck had changed. This was not unusual—all specks change. But *this* one had fingers dug into the mud, breath specifically placed. *This* one was given life that not all specks had.

The being with the many eyes set one eye on the speck and continued on.

There was always work to be done.

As the many eyed being watched the planet and its inhabitants, it noticed a few things.

Much of the planet's inhabitants were left longing in some form or fashion. In most cases, this natural punishment to the many was due to the actions of a few, the being drew its conclusions.

From the perspective of the being, bellies shriveled and mouths gaped with their lack, brains turned to dust with thirst, eyes wept tears of blood for the things they could see but never have close enough to hold.

Even those that did not come close to perishing still clambered for something.

Their lives were so short, only through its given sight could it see that they filled with aches amongst the joy that sparked like tiny fires in the eyes of the many eyed being.

And there were the others, short lives just the same but amassing great hordes. These were the inhabitants that led the charge of war. On their mighty piles of wealth, they moved others like the pieces of a game. The many eyed being usually didn't bother to keep up with how fast the board changed, but it learned the general rules.

The being learned the words of the trade. The *full*, the *hungry*.

But to actually be *full* and to be *hungry* was something that wasn't easily understood by the being. By its closest estimate, to be *full* was like being in His presence—radiating with the heat twice that of his largest blue-white star.

To be full was to be satisfied. To be full was to be content.

So to be the opposite of that, as it seemed they were opposites, to be *hungry* was like being away from Him, the light cast from within them a pitiful ember in the dark.

To be hungry was to be alone. To be hungry was to be directionless.

But the being knew that these comparisons weren't quite right either. For the inhabitants would never experience Him as the beings did. Just as the beings could not experience Him as the inhabitants did.

But, now that it pondered more, for those with their hordes and command, a better description would be that they were overly full. If being full was to be in His presence, then to be overly full could be compared to the Brother it had last seen long ago. But the inhabitants that were overly full *weren't* struck down, they were often held up. As the smartest, as the best. The many eyed being closed some of its many eyes and wondered if its Brother praised these overly full or scorned them.

Were they honored as it had not been, or punished as it had been? Was there mercy held by this Brother? Mercy not shown to it itself?

These were unnecessary thoughts.

The many eyed being wheeled on.

The being with the many eyes focused one section of those eyes onto the blue planet below and its inhabitants. It had not paid much attention to the inhabitants for many celestial moments, but much had changed on the planet since it last looked.

The eyes narrowed in on what had drawn its attention, there had been a light on the planet. It was not much to the being, but it was something noteworthy to the planet. From its perspective, it saw the millions and millions of bodies that had been discarded in the time surrounding the light. Piled high, still visible to the being even after the bodies were dust.

Another being, one with many wings, came by. The being with the many eyes called out to it as the other wheeled past.

{Brother?}

[Brother.] The many winged being stopped.

{Why do they do these things?} It did not need to elaborate, for the many winged being could see the core of the many eyed one.

[They are Man. They were made in His image.]

{He does not do such things}

[An image is not a copy, Brother. An image is the reflection of your wheels on the shining of a meteor shower.]

{So, distorted, you mean}

[Distorted is a term for it.]

{Why would He make a distortion when he could make a copy?}

[His ways are His own.]

This Brother does not wish to speak further on this, and it does not. This is usually the way of conversations that evoke Him. The being with the many wings continued on.

The being with the many eyes attended to its many responsibilities.

The inhabitants—the distortions of Him—had always endured war. This was understandable, the being was also a veteran of war. But despite its long observations, it still did not fully comprehend what they were warring about.

Some Distortions had things they needed. Others did not. This might have caused much strife. It might have been largely permitted. In most ages, it depended on the minuscule section of land the inhabitants occupied. The many eyed being found the inhabitants curious, in this way. In its own land, where the beings did the bidding of Him, nothing changed. They were the same as they were since they became alive in the hands of Him and set aside for the next to be made.

Minus a few brothers, of course.

But that was as it should be, it figured. For His plan superseded all, so if it happened, it was His plan. Which meant the inhabitant's bloody lives of war and hunger and greed was also His plan.

The many eyed being somehow knew this was a point of contention to the inhabitants, and so left the point alone.

To be like the inhabitants is not its place.

At a moment when the being with the many eyes found itself watching the inhabitants, the distortions, another brother flew by. This was a being of many mouths, some singing, some silent, some praising in a way not like either.

{You have been down there, you have seen them} The being with the many eyes called out.

The being of many mouths stopped, shifted.

(Yes.)

{What were they like?}

(Watching them from above is incomparable to being amongst them.)

{Tell me, how far does their hunger stretch? You with many mouths would know the best}

(Sometimes, they hunger to the point of devouring their own and themselves. But that is meaningless to you without the contexts needed.)

{Is there anything they do not devour, even at their most desperate?}

The being of many mouths paused.

(No.)

The being of many mouths moved on, and the being with the many eyes understood, as it saw into the core of the other, and knew.

It considered the planet beneath them.

Of course, the distortions also turned their utensils to the ground beneath them. Great, gouging trenches dug to remove what they could use and everything in their way.

Trees are felled. Mountains are hollowed. Waters are poisoned. Lands are scorched. Animals are hunted and dined on to the point of extinction. The being with many eyes turned one wheel and once again saw the O'ahu 'ō'ō, the Madeiran scops owl, the Olson's petrel.

They had gaping mouths and clasping hands, and anything could fall prey to them.

If they carved their Earth, their strangers, their kin, themselves?

What else would be left?

The inhabitants had turned their eyes outward.

Oh, they had always looked up, up, up. *Towards the Heavens*, they said. But now, their feet followed.

They had set a great eye, several great eyes, outside of their planet. Always watching, but not like the being. Captured much, but not everything. Certainly not the being with the many eyes staring right back.

With wild abandon, they finally stepped off their planet and its tiny moon and into the full cosmos. Flinging themselves wildly away from their little blue speck that they've taken so much from.

Would they continue to take from what they find in the rest of the great expanse? The many eyed being did not dare to try and guess, as guessing was not its role. But from what its many eyes had captured, these inhabitants truly were distortions of Him.

And so, they would.

and darling...

SON OF NYX

ACEMISTAKES

Son of Nyx

SAOIRSE FOUND HERSELF SUDDENLY IN THE WOODS.

Blinking in confusion, she looked around.

She could've sworn that she had been at home just moments ago. And now, surrounded by trees and silence rather than the noise of the city and her stuff-dread filled her. Cautiously, Saoirse started walking around the forest. Slowly at first, peaking around trees and freezing whenever she thought she heard a sound. Soon she had gained a little more confidence, and moved a little quicker to try and find a way out of this place.

The sounds of a dog barking had Saoirse nearly jumping out of her skin. She turned to look for the source of the noise. *Maybe with a dog nearby there would be people as well.*

It didn't take too long to spot the dog, but the sight caused her to freeze. The dog was a transparent blue. It wagged its tail as it peered into a baby's crib. Saoirse stared at the see-through dog for a moment before continuing on her path. She chalked it up to this being a weird dream. She had fallen asleep on her couch and that was why she was in the forest and seeing weird dogs.

Soon enough Saoirse spotted more transparent figures moving between the trees. The sounds of laughter filled the silence. She watched as two kids played, chasing each other happily through the woods. With a jolt she had realized that she *knew* them. It was *her* as a child and her old friend, Maeve. They'd always played in the woods behind Maeve's house growing up. As long time friends, Saoirse had always found herself drawn to the outspoken girl even when she'd seemed to be less than an ideal friend. With a sigh, she turned away from the image of the two of them playing together.

In spite of her confusion at what was happening, Saoirse continued down her path. She pushed away the memory of her time with Maeve.

She sighed as she looked around, curious to see what other memories would appear in this strange forest—It didn't take very long for her mind to come upon another memory.

Saoirse paused as she watched a version of herself that she recognized from her college days—a box in her hands. The past version of her tripped at the weight as she balanced on one foot to close the front door behind her.

At the sight, Saoirse smiled softly.

It was the day that she'd brought home Zeus—a little white cat that she found wandering the streets where she worked. He was a sweet boy, always willing to cuddle after a hard day. Saoirse had been so focused on the memory that she jumped when something brushed against her leg. Looking down, Saoirse was met with the sight of that same cat from her memories. Zeus had a blue tint to his fur, a lighter shade than the dog that she had seen before.

"Oh Zeus!" she'd exclaimed happily.

Bending down, she picked up the now translucent cat. Less white and more of a blue but still the familiar cat she loved so dearly. Zeus purred as Saoirse pulled him close. After a moment, the cat squirmed, asking to be let down. Saoirse followed his request after giving him a quick kiss to the top of his head and set him back down on the ground.

Zeus immediately moved to walk further into the woods, meowing at Saoirse to follow him. Confused, she still did as the little cat asked and followed after him.

As the two walked through the forest, memories danced through the trees. Good times and bad appeared. The sound of conversation, laughing, or crying filled the silence of the woods. The words of the conversations were too far away and still Saoirse strained to try and hear what was being said.

Sometimes she remembered the memories that appeared, but some seemed to be ones that she had forgotten.

Saoirse walked past all of her loved ones. Her mother, father, brother, aunts and uncles, cousins, and all of her friends.

Each had made an appearance in the forest as she followed after Zeus.

A house filled her field of vision. It was a small house, more like a cottage the more that she looked at it. Brick accents, white colored walls, and a dark brown roof. It looked like a normal house for the most part, the only thing weird about it was the lavender shine to it. It looked almost ghostly. There was a comfortable air to the place and for some reason it felt like home to Saoirse—though she had never lived in a cottage like the one standing before her, always apartments that cost too much. Saoirse had never been able to afford a home in the city that she lived in. And yet here she stood in front of some place where she felt like she truly belonged.

In front of the doorway stood a man.

Saoirse paused in her path as she observed the other person that had shown up. He seemed tall and had striking white hair shown bright amongst a black cloak. Transparent butterflies flew around him, a couple landing on the staff that he carried in his hand. Most animals she'd seen had a blue tint to them but these butterflies were purple. Zeus had stopped as well, chirping questioningly as he brushed against Saoirse's leg. That wasn't enough to convince her to continue walking. Instead, she continued to observe this man.

The man turned from where he'd been focused on the bugs fluttering around his head, and Saoirse couldn't stop the almost uncomfortable chill that ran up her spine as they locked eyes. The man's eyes had a sad but knowing look as they simply just gazed at each other. Neither one made a move for a moment, but then the man was walking towards Saoirse, slowly as if not to scare her. He stopped a few steps in front of her and smiled softly.

Saoirse said nothing—simply stared at the other as he approached, trying to figure out why he was familiar. His name felt like it was on the tip of her tongue but she couldn't place why. The look in his eyes made her feel uncomfortable. She felt like he could almost read her thoughts. Her brows furrowed, not knowing how to react

or even what to say. Should she speak first and demand answers? Or would he explain things?

"Hello Saoirse," he murmured.

And there was her answer. As if noticing her internal struggle, the man smiled softly. "I am Thanatos. I'm here to lead you through your afterlife. Your companion here did a good job of leading you through your memories to me." he said simply, glancing down at Zeus. The cat seemed to puff up slightly in pride.

Thanatos, the god of Death. A jolt of fear ran down Saoirse's spine.

Knowing the man's identity made the situation so much more *real*.

Maybe she'd been in denial this entire time—surrounded by ghostly figures of her life—but it felt like only now she truly understood what was happening.

She had *died*.

And Zeus was only here to show her the path to this god that stood before her.

What was going to happen to him? What was going to happen to her?

The forest of memories seemed like a better option than the unknown that awaited her with Thanatos—Saoirse took a step back, body tensing as she considered running back the way she came.

"I'm sure you have questions and we have the time, Saoirse."

Saoirse didn't say anything for a moment. She had almost expected to be led to her afterlife immediately once Thanatos had introduced himself. She *still* didn't like that the god seemed to know about her and why she was hesitating, but she guessed that so many people before her had reacted the same way. So many questions ran through her mind, but the ones that stood out the most were questions about how her family was doing.

"We do not need to leave immediately. I will answer whatever questions you have plaguing your mind." Thanatos said.

With a sigh, Saoirse nodded and reached down to pick Zeus up—he chirped happily, snuggling into her arms. "Will Zeus come with

me?" she asked, almost hesitantly as she looked down at the cat in her arms.

"If you wish." Thanatos answers, "I do not believe he would allow me to keep you from him." Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Saoirse smiles at the thought.

The idea that Zeus would come with her was more of a comfort than the idea that she had the time to ask questions.

Saoirse asked first about why Zeus was the one to greet her, rather than leaving her to explore the woods alone. Thanatos' reply was simple, that it was customary for loved pets to be the go-between and guides through memories. Her family was okay, but grieving, and her brother had even gotten into his dream college. This made Saoirse tear up in pride. When all of her questions had been answered—Saoirse took a deep breath and hesitated for only a moment before stating that she was ready to move on.

Thanatos smiled and led her back towards the front of the house. He opened the door and motioned for her to enter.

Saoirse didn't hesitate again before stepping through the door to start her afterlife with Zeus happily curled up in her arms.

TO SOMEONE FROM A WARMER CLIMATE

Roohoo

To Someone From a Warmer Climate (Uiscefhuaraithe)

I'M NO BETTER THAN ORPHEUS.

I realise it—not the day we meet or the day we marry, but on the last day of our honeymoon.

I realise it when she cups a wildflower in her hand and lowers her face towards it, inhaling deeply like it's the last time she'll breathe fresh air.

Her smile is radiant, almost infectious and instead of gently pulling the flower from its roots, plucking it off the stem, she reaches for my shirt and tugs me closer to share in the gentle experience.

"Look," She whispers and sudden movements and tugged shirts have never been so gentle, "It's in full bloom."

I wish I could hold a moment in my hand forever. There are days where I look at her and I wish I could be everything she wants me to be but at the end of it all, I'm no better than Orpheus.

We're from different worlds, her and I.

I flinch at the smallest things. She laughs at scary movies.

I hold onto the things I love so dearly, I'm scared they'll be crushed under my weight like a child who accidentally crushes a butterfly's wings.

She wouldn't kill a spider, even if it made its home on her pillow.

I think there's always something looming around the corner, the residue left behind from a slightly sticky childhood. She has so much hope in her heart, she thinks that sometimes it's a flaw.

We're born to different realities. I don't know who's in the correct one, but I think I'd much rather live in hers than ever show her mine.

Different climates, I suppose. Hers is a much warmer climate than mine. Far more forgiving. Loving. There's no faulting that, only appreciating something when you realise you've been deprived of it for so long. I can feel the warmth radiating from her home and heart whenever I hear her voice.

I want to be the version of Orpheus you hear about at the beginning of the story. The sort of person who plays gentle music for their lover and promises to walk to the ends of the earth for her. The sort to lead with confidence and full promises, *stay close to me, love. I know the way out.*

But I'm not.

I'd hold Chiron at knifepoint and Hades, at the end of my gun, if I knew they'd taken you. I'd dig you back up at the funeral, dirt crusted nails and a stained face for all to see my sick desperation. I'd balance, slackline style, over river Styx because I am not soft hands or blurred edges as much as I crave to be.

I was raised somewhere cold. Where someone grabbing you was a threat. Where hands cradling your face meant crescent moon marks from nails dug into flesh. Voices that were loud meant anger and never song or laughter so pure it couldn't be stopped.

Where desperation was a trait well praised.

I met her for the first time at a bar. She'd been dragged along by some of her friends, miles out of her comfort zone and ordering a coke because she didn't drink.

She came up to me, because I was the only other person in the whole place who was drinking something non-alcoholic.

She'd slipped into the booth across from me, huffing a strand of hair out of her face. She had a greeting on the tip of her tongue that she accidentally swallowed when she saw my face. I blinked at her. She barely skipped a beat.

She shook herself free of the reaction and got comfortable.

"Thank god, I've been looking for someone else who doesn't drink," she laughed airly and she fiddled with her straw. "I'm Cara."

I glanced around the bar. Silence dragged for a few moments too long. "Jackie."

"Were you also dragged along by a group, Jackie?"

"No." My every comment oozed with disinterest. It's a miracle she kept trying to talk to me.

"Oh." Cara leaned back, eyes darting over all the people as she looked for someone close to our age. "I was. It's silly, I don't drink or enjoy going to parties much at all. I just didn't want to miss out."

I didn't say anything. She took my silence for an opening. "So why are you posted up here, drinking overpriced cokes?"

"I don't care much for alcohol."

"I gathered that," She grinned, pointing to my drink. "But why are you here?"

I shrugged. There was a short silence. She seemed unbothered, happy to just sit with company. I felt like I had to keep my attention split.

"I'm babysitting." I finally said and she perked up at that. Her eyes were trained on me, glittering with curiosity. I nodded my head to the side. "Red shirt guy. Brown hair. His pants are too tight and he's playing pool."

"With the jacket?"

I nodded again. "That's my dad."

"Oh."

I tried to gauge a reaction. I remember thinking how difficult it was to read. Like she was a book I couldn't read from my current distance.

"I'm giving him a ride home."

Slowly, she turned her head away from him and back to me and her drink. Cara tapped the table impatiently, mind whirring in that magnificent way of hers.

"Hm, shame. I was going to ask if you wanted to get some terrible fried food with me." My eyes darted to her face and she hid a smile behind her drink. "I guess that's a no, then?"

That was the first time I'd smiled all night.

I sometimes think that for all my masks and all her softness, she'd be a better Orpheus than me. That if anyone could lead you out of the underworld, it would be my wife.

I whisper it to her on the walk back to the hotel, our final night before heading home from a trip in paradise. Head leaning against my shoulder and our hands tangled together like puzzle pieces. The ring still feels weird on my finger.

You'd be the better Orpheus. You'd be the one leading me out of the dark.

"Why do you think that?" She whispers. I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. It slips loose soon enough.

"I'd turn back." I say, because it's as simple as that. "Even from the smallest shuffle, I think I'd have to look. I'm not strong enough to just believe you'd be right behind me."

She comes to a halt and forces me to look at her.

"Jackie, darling, you'd be the perfect Orpheus." She murmurs and I've been lost before, but that feels nothing like losing myself to her. "Orpheus didn't turn from weakness. He turned like the hundreds of times he'd turned before. Instinct."

"He turned because he couldn't wait." I respond, voice soft. Careful.

"If he was acting just out of love he would have done anything to keep that simple rule unbroken." She thumbs the freckles on my cheek. "It was habit."

The story doesn't tell you that part. That Orpheus has that softness in him.

That as he approached the end of the tunnel and light shone on his face for the first time since his journey began, what ran through his mind was excitement to finally show Eurydice the sun after she'd been gone.

To share that beautiful view with her.

The sun had set long ago by the time we'd perched ourselves on the wall that ran along as a kind of divider between the carpark and the beach. My stomach ached from laughing. She held onto a packet of chips that had gone cold, eating them all the same.

"You're sure your Dad can get home alright?"

"I don't think he even knew I was there." I smiled, wind carrying the scent of the sea through the air.

"It's cold tonight," I whispered to the wind. Cara hummed and then shuffled closer, shoulder against mine. I tensed, breath snagging in my throat as she hooked her leg underneath mine and swung her leg forwards and back over the ledge, taking my leg with her.

"Better?" Cara asked, a playful mischief in her voice. I forced myself to relax into it, repeating a mantra in my head like an ode to safety that I was only a few meters from my car.

"Yeah." I swung the leg she'd hooked her foot on reassuringly and I could see her smile in the corner of my eye.

We stayed like that for a while. Stealing warmth from each other in the silliest of ways. Cara seemed to radiate heat in the cold of that night and I was nothing if not grateful for it.

"Can I ask," Cara began, uncertainty lacing her voice in a way it hadn't at all that night. I shook my head.

"No," I whispered and Cara's voice died. Her lips pursed and for a second, ice shot through my body when I thought she might leave.

"Okay." Cara said, dropping her head against my shoulder. I could feel her breathing, slow and deep. Chest gently rising and falling.

"Sorry," I hesitated, then slowly dipped my head on top of hers. Holding my head so it was just barely touching. So the weight

wasn't on her entirely, but she could feel that I was trying. That I wanted to try so achingly bad to reciprocate the kind of touch she was offering, reassuring her I was comfortable with it all.

"Don't be sorry. It's fine." Cara said. "I hope that one day you'll tell me."

"Maybe." I ran a finger under my eye, jaw clenched as it traced black and purple skin.

It's very easy to say my wife is the better Orpheus.

She's the one who led me out of the dark. The one who grabbed my hand when I thought I knew what my life would look like and turned me tenderly towards the sun so I could feel the warmth on my face instead of how it usually burnt a hole into my back.

The truth is that we don't give Eurydice enough credit. We don't talk about her quiet strength. Her unwavering trust, the kind of understanding most people don't ever get to know.

The fact she's the most beautiful soul I've ever known, the kind of person you'd go to hell and back for. I am not that kind of person.

I'm Orpheus for all his flaws and mistakes. I have all the desperate traits of a person who would burn the world down for someone I love, loyal to a fault. Ready to go down if it means one more moment holding her. I would always look back. In every lifetime. At every opportunity, I would feel that pull to look back and check she's okay. That yearning to know if she's safe like a sickness that rocks you so deeply to your core, you forget what it's like to be without it.

Orpheus and Eurydice is meant to be a tragic love story. I hope ours never ends tragically. I hope I love Cara til my last breath.

I hope that Cara knows, that night we met and sat by the beach, felt like breathing for the first time.

As the sunsets on the last day of our honeymoon, as we bundle up in the warmth of our hotel room and I hesitate to close the blinds of our window, I think about how I'm no better than Orpheus.

"Cara," I call, turning back and she pokes her head out from the bathroom, wrapped up in a bathrobe, hair just barely passing for dry. "Look at how beautiful this sunset is."

Orpheus turned like the hundreds of times before that very moment. A hundred times to get lost in her eyes, to kiss her lips, hand her a coffee and smile because what a beautiful habit it is; to love so freely. I hope she knows I'd look back a thousand times for her.

You can't share so many looks, such intimacy, smiles and wandering hands without being just as guilty as Orpheus was to look back.

I want to share the sunset with her. As we reach the surface of the underworld, finally feel our lungs inhale the sharp dewy morning air, can you see the sunshine as I do?

Cara, my Eurydice, the sort of person born to a warmer climate.

AND WHAT CAN STILL BE KNOWN

ROBIN

Butchered Tongue

THEY DOCK AT THE PORT AND THEY SPEAK THE LANGUAGE there like proper Englishwomen.

Not a soul bats an eye.

They are alone and आद्य speaks a language that academics like to philosophize and only priests keep holy. Ⲭⲉⲙⲙⲁϩⲱⲣ listens. She recites and reads and sings and Ⲭⲉⲙⲙⲁϩⲱⲣ sings along with her.

"It is strange, this world we live in."

Ⲭⲉⲙⲙⲁϩⲱⲣ holds her hand and traces its ancient knells. आद्य cannot remember the exact century when she was born, but her heart will always know where. "You know more than I do that it has always been a strange world. Tell me more."

आद्य tells her of names buried in this homeland and whispers sweet nothings that mean more than what could be said by any other word.

She speaks of islands and the wind and waves and clay in her hair and her mother's ancient endearments and the smell of flowers and smoke that smells sweet filling damp caves until she's run out of words, until there are none left.

Then she whispers the names of the places forgotten, of maps overwritten, of their meanings and their gods. They are there, and they are somewhere else—she is home, and she is somewhere else, completely.

Ⲭⲉⲙⲙⲁϩⲱⲣ has heard it all before, but she listens, and then she holds her close.

"Do you remember Alexandria?" she asks, and आद्य nods, "When we met? Even the Arabi there has changed now." She speaks in

that last vestige of the Pharaohs, taught from books and charts, unfamiliar but unextinct, words that carry the tenor of a land and its soil and its great river, which would tell her of the changing shore and washed-up lotuses.

The words that belong in museums—that come from her lips—tell of massacres and martyrs, of home and tilling the earth and abundance in only the draw of the needed breath.

आद्य listens and replies in the same, "I remember a stubborn woman, and an angry woman, and the love of my life."

The world is so fast changing. Even immortality feels like it can hardly keep up.

But they have each other, in each foreign land and foreign age.

"Darling, there is nothing sacred anymore," आद्य cries, knees on the cement where she has fallen and hands pressed against her face.

They've gone west; Χεμμαχωρ has never been, but आद्य wandered there often, before the first millenium. She should've come back sooner. They are standing in the middle of what is now the cement road of a highway track, in the middle of so much that has been lost.

आद्य gasps and prays in words that only butchered tongues now speak, buried and cemented over and stomped out. One would think, after so many years alive, that one would run out of tears. But there have been millions of words in millions of places that all mean *grief* and *loss* and *alone*.

Χεμμαχωρ kneels next to her, and asks, "Teach me, आद्य. Tell me their names."

Her love presses her tear-stained hands to the hot cement, as though able to reach the loamy earth underneath, and speaks.

"I wonder sometimes if I have forgotten more than I remember," आद्य says. They are north of the Great Desert, and searching for monuments. It's strange, the way that stone can hold so much of the past. The rubble at their feet, scattered on the street, tells of the time-keeper's fragile nature and destruction upon destruction on the hearts of its venerators.

Ϫεμμαϩωρ says, "I will remember for you."

आद्य has spent so long alone, strange lands her only home. Now her home is found in the lilt and melody of Ϫεμμαϩωρ's voice as it forms around familiar words that really, at the end of every day, only mean *home*.

Palmyra, she tells her, always seemed like one of those places where the breath of the past was fresh, and immovable fixtures cast familiar shades. "It has been lost forever for a while now," आद्य murmurs, trying to find the foundations, shattered as they have been. "They have stolen the future."

She has seen a thousand temples fall. It does not hurt any less, for they do not fall by themselves.

Ϫεμμαϩωρ takes her hand. She is not new to this kind of crime, either. Especially not here—not now. But she is more hopeful. "It will be remembered," she says to her in that ancient tongue that once decorated the ghost-walls surrounding them.

आद्य smiles at her, and wishes, as she sometimes does, that she was younger than she was.

Deserts and jungle and forests and vast plains and endless mountains and islands in the middle of the sea, आद्य has tread, each century with a freshly broken spirit. But now there is her love, who brushes her tears from her lashes with soft fingertips and whispers, "आद्य, आद्य, my light, my soul, *आद्य*," the way her lips hold the name before it falls prompting echoes of the days when speaking and storytelling and stars felt simple.

She doesn't remember the names of her mother, or her father or her sisters or the name of their house or the river that thundered

so noisily besides it. "Remember," Ϫєммаϩωр tells her, in the language आद्य taught her, "that it is in your heart, it will never leave you."

Sometimes she fills in the blanks for her, stories she'd told her centuries ago and that she'd committed to stone-like memory. Each time those familiar lost words reach her ears, आद्य feels again the monsoon of her wandering youth touch her skin, when the world was new to her and the present felt like its own forever.

"You are my heart," she replies every time. She says it after Ϫєммаϩωр's nightmares, too, when she wakes up screaming of fire and fear and not a single person understanding a word. She says it in that bastion slowly weathered and covered in caution signs, "My heart, Ϫєммаϩωр, I will always be here."

And so they reminisce, of years together and alone, with words they share and keep so safely known. When there are no more translators left, they'll still speak, two guarded hearts as their home.

@v-in-the-flowers

@v-in-the-flowers

First
Light

THANK YOU

When I originally designed this idea, I proposed it as a challenge that I would undertake solo in the new year (in this case, beginning on January 1st, 2025). I designed it as a creative project in which I would write something inspired by each of Hozier's songs as he has been my top artist for the last five years as well as one of my greatest inspirations. I called it an "Anthology" and when the idea of turning this into a community project crossed my mind I was excited but also unsure if this would be a project that others were interested in taking part in.

The beginning of this community project idea started as a massive list of hypothetical questions I posed to my friend North (known for the *Ineffable Eras Zine*) and they were very helpful throughout the duration of this project.

The formal project actually began as an interest check, then it moved to applications, before finally—at the beginning of February 2025—it was a discord server full of very friendly people ready to create something fantastic together.

I want to express a very heartfelt thank you to all of those who took part in the project—the artists, writers, everyone.

I also want to thank *you*—the reader—for engaging with the works.

If you would like to express any thoughts or thanks in return, you can direct them to the fanzine's email (hozierfanzine@gmail.com, be sure to include who you would like the message to be redirected to, by including their username or the title of their work) or to the individual artist or writer by using the contact information that can be found on the next few pages.

Thank you,
HistorianRoo

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Social Media Circled was used in contributor's credits
and Charcuterie Ornaments for additional graphics.
Noto Sans Coptic and Gotu were used in
"And What Can Still Be Known."

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